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An Exploration of the Experiences of Equine Therapy Specialists

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Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

Jaime L. Battestella-Williams

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

Review Committee

Dr. Sandra Rasmussen, Committee Chairperson, Psychology Faculty

Dr. Kimberly McCann, Committee Member, Psychology Faculty

Dr. Tracy Mallett, University Reviewer, Psychology Faculty

The Office of the Provost

Walden University
2019

Abstract

An Exploration of the Experiences of Equine Therapy Specialists

by

Jaime L. Battestella-Williams

MA, Walden University, 2016

BA, Stockton University, 2006

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Psychology

Walden University

November 2019

Abstract

Horses have been an integral part of human history and progress for centuries. Horses and humans have united in diverse ways, including farming, war, construction, racing, and other areas of sports. Researchers have indicated that the use of horses for mental health and wellness is a growing trend that continues to lack strong, empirical evidence. Currently, there is limited research available on the experiences of certified equine specialists incorporating horses into mental health and wellness. It is essential to gain further insight into the incorporation of horses into psychology and counseling for therapists, as well as potential clients, interested in this form of alternative therapy. In this qualitative study, constructivism and phenomenology were used to explore the experiences of therapists using horses in therapy for mental health treatment and wellness. Purposeful sampling was used to recruit 8 therapists for semistructured interviews to gain an understanding of this phenomenon. Data analysis for this study was conducted through a phenomenological approach, thematic analysis, and *a priori* and emergent coding to identify 8 themes, activities, goals, and outcomes in using horses for mental health treatment and wellness, and insight into the use of horses for mental health and wellness. According to the American Horse Council, there are thousands of unwanted horses in the United States. Incorporating horses into psychology and counseling decreases the number of unwanted horses, as well as horse slaughter. Bringing horses and humans together promotes positive social change by giving both people and horses a new purpose.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my daughters, Ashli Lyn and Alysia Lee.

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To my chair, Dr. Sandra Rasmussen-Thank you for your kindness and support, and the encouragement to celebrate the small achievements.

To my committee member, Dr. Kimberly McCann, for working with Dr. Rasmussen to help me to achieve my goals.

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To my daughters, Ashli and Alysa-Always believe in yourself

To my mom, Cindy, and my sister, Kristin, for always listening and believing in me.

To my colleagues, Diane and Hilary, for always supporting me, listening to my ideas, as well as my whines and complaints, and for being my practice guinea pigs throughout my doctoral journey!

To my beloved Hunter- Many late nights you were my sole companion and support. I will love you and miss you forever, Hunty Bear!

To Ariana-God knew he wanted you to come live with me. You stepped into Hunter's "paws" and continued those late-night journeys with me. You are a true friend, Ari Bean, and I love you!

To Comanche, Cherokee, and June-my beloved horses and my inspiration for this research study. Without you, I may have never realized the powerful connections between horses and humans. I love you forever.

With God, all things are possible.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Many people are fascinated by horses. “Myth, magic, mystery, and metaphor have surrounded the topic of horses and human healthcare for centuries” (Hallberg, 2018, p. 12). Although the involvement of animals as part of a therapeutic process remained absent from professional literature up until the 1960s, there is a rich history between humans and horses (Bachi, Terkel, & Teichman, 2011). Horses have provided transportation, delivered goods, plowed fields, and carried men to war (Frederick, Hatz, & Lanning, 2015), and throughout the 20th century, there has been an increase in leisure activities involving horses (Billany, 2012). In more recent decades, horses have been used to help people with a wide range of mental health issues and emotional difficulties (Frederick, Hatz, & Lanning, 2015). Unfortunately, recent years have also witnessed the increase of unwanted horses, with approximately 200,000 horses shipped annually to rescue facilities, federal lands, or slaughter (Weiss et al., 2017).

The propensity of humans to be drawn to horses for their healing qualities has been shown throughout history, but surprisingly little is known from a research perspective about the role of horses as a determining factor in human change ” (Hallberg, 2018, p.14; Bachi, 2012; Kern-Godal et al., 2015). Equine-related interventions have increased in popularity but have been subjected to limited systematic investigation (Anestis et al. et al., 2014). Additionally, other researchers have studied the beneficial physical effects of equine-related interventions, but less is known about the potential psychological benefits of horses (Kendall et al., 2015). Future research needs to explore the concept of why horses are necessary or helpful in order to provide a further, more in-

depth understanding of the incorporation of horses into psychology and counseling. In this research study, I sought to understand the meanings behind the human relationship with horses, and an understanding of the activities used to facilitate this relationship. The union between horses and humans in psychology and counseling gives both a new purpose.

I will discuss these topics in greater detail throughout this chapter. This chapter includes the following topics: background, problem statement, the purpose of the research study, the research question addressed by this study, the theoretical and conceptual frameworks, the definitions of the terms used, the scopes, limitations, and significance.

Background of the Study

Research shows that the incorporation of horses into psychology and counseling is a quickly growing mental health innovation with the role of horses in a variety of equine-related approaches (Lee, Dakin, & McLure, 2014). A number of research studies show that horses are effective in a wide range of issues for mental health and wellness.

According to recent literature, horses are suited to therapy for a number of reasons, including mental health and wellness with diverse populations (McNamara, 2017). Equine-assisted interventions have grown in popularity and employ a wide diversity of practices (DeSantis et al., 2017). Equine-assisted interventions refers to a wide range of activities and therapies that incorporate horses in the treatment of individuals with the goal of improving social, emotional, and behavioral skills (Alfonso, Alfonso, Llabre, & Fernandez, 2015). Involvement in equine interventions uses a strength-based and solution-focused approach to help individuals develop new skills

(Gergely, 2012), as well as develop leadership skills for diverse groups (Gibbons, et al., 2017). Horses are also highly suitable for therapeutic work due to being herd animals, which facilitates cooperation, competition, and bonding among members. (Bachi et al., 2011). Similar to humans, horses vary in character, behavior, life experiences, and memories (Bachi et al., 2011). Additionally, using guided interactions with horses is a nonpharmaceutical approach to mental health and wellness (DaBelko-Schoeny et al., 2014). As a result, equine-assisted activities and therapy have become recognized as a viable treatment option by consumers, as well as medical and mental health professionals (Hallberg, 2018).

Wilson et al. (2017) explored the perspectives of eight therapists who were providing equine interventions to adolescents diagnosed with depression, anxiety, or both, using a model developed by the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA). The researchers sought to learn why the therapists chose to work in the field of equine interventions, and if there was a preference for equine interventions over other therapeutic techniques. Wilson et al. (2017) concluded that the therapists perceived the effectiveness of equine assisted psychotherapy in providing interpersonal and emotional growth for clients. However, the authors noted that future research studies should address the lack of knowledge in the wider community about the effectiveness of equine interventions and its potential for treatment. This research study only addressed the EAGALA model, which presented limited standardization and application of clinical practices.

Johns, Bobat, and Holder (2016) explored the perceptions of 14 therapists ranging in age from 20–69, who were also using the EAGALA model. The authors also found

that therapists perceived the effectiveness of equine interventions in providing interpersonal and emotional growth for clients. Johns et al. (2017) stated that future research should include a diverse sample of participants to elicit cross-cultural dynamics and cultural variations in therapists' experiences of equine interventions as a treatment modality.

Lee and Makela (2018) interviewed eight mental health practitioners experienced in the EAGALA model of equine intervention to explore their strategies and activities. The findings showed that mental health practitioners using equine interventions incorporate specific horses to provide different levels of challenges for clients. The researchers recommended that future research address cognitive activities to enhance the collaborative relationships between horses and humans. Additionally, Gergely (2012) explored the major components of the EAGALA model for equine interventions, including those related to service implementation, the use of evidence-based practices, standardized outcome measures, and understanding the role of the horse. Research found that participants offered promising feedback about participation in equine interventions as a new type of therapy, as well as the view of horses as a central role in the therapeutic process. However, future research studies should examine the effectiveness of equine interventions in treating specific mental health issues.

Problem Statement

Humans have interacted with horses throughout history in a variety of ways. The practice of having horses as social companions can be found in all historical periods and spans all cultural boundaries and ages (Billany, 2012). Horses have been used as a source for transportation, sports, war, and labor. Historical sources also suggest that horses were

viewed as healing or therapeutic for humans since the time of the early Greeks (Hallberg, 2018). However, involvement of horses as part of a therapeutic process remained absent from modern professional literature until the 1960s (Bachi et al., 2011). Modern research attests to the popularity and beneficial effects of using horses in psychology and counseling (Kendall et al., 2015), and many organizations are now offering certification in a wide variety of equine-related interventions.

Several credentialing bodies, as well as diverse training opportunities, certificate programs, and membership groups have been created to support the development and use of equine-assisted activities and therapy (Hallberg, 2018). Each of these entities has their own model, guidelines, and applications for equine-assisted interventions. However, a review of existing research among these diverse groups demonstrates limited standardization in terminology including the definitions of terms and the application of clinical practices (Hallberg (2018).

Although history clearly demonstrates the propensity for humans to be drawn to horses, there is limited information from a research perspective about the role of the horse as a determining factor in human change (Hallberg, 2018). Qualitative research studies conducted by Wilson, Buultjens, Monfries, & Karimi (2017) and Johns, Bobat, & Holder (2016) explored the experiences and perspectives of therapist certified through EAGALA. The review of these research studies depicts the terminology, concepts, and treatment strategies of the EAGALA model, which presents a limited understanding of equine-assisted interventions. Additionally, there are several other organizations and programs that offer certifications to practice equine-assisted activities and therapy. Each of these organizations has a unique mission statement and vision for the use of horses for

mental health and wellness. It is essential that research studies focus specifically on one organization in order to gain an independent understanding of each organization for an overall discernment of equine-assisted activities and therapy for mental health and wellness. Without standardized language and internationally accepted terminology, it is impossible to code and measure concepts and treatment strategies effectively (Hallberg, 2018). Research supporting the use of equine interventions in therapy lacks a unified, widely accepted, and empirically supported theoretical framework (Trotter, 2012). Thematic analysis of data conducted by McNamara (2017) revealed the lack of a theoretical model, variations between clinical practices, and inadequate research into perceived mechanisms driving equine facilitated therapy. Consequently, a notable gap continues to exist between scholarly research and the personal passions, beliefs, opinions, and patterns of practice, such as goals, activities, and outcomes that are prevalent in current accessible literature (Hallberg, 2018). Therefore, a qualitative research study exploring the patterns of practice, including goals, activities, and outcomes, that are used in equine-assisted activities and therapies described by therapists from other certifying membership groups, such as the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH Intl), can offer a much-needed alternative perspective for the understanding of equine-assisted interventions while addressing a gap in literature. The experiences of PATH Intl certified equine specialists and therapists in providing equine-assisted activities and therapies to their clients, as well as the contributory factors in choosing PATH Intl for certification, is currently not known.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological research study was to focus on equine specialists certified through PATH Intl and to explore the experiences of the therapists in setting goals, planning activities, and evaluating outcomes of equine-assisted activities and therapy. The approach was of a qualitative nature and consisted of in-depth interviews with equine specialists certified through PATH Intl. Established in 1969 as the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA), the association changed its name in 2011 (Hallberg, 2018). PATH Intl has more than 4,800 certified instructors and equine specialists around the globe and continues to be global authority, resource, and advocate for equine-assisted activities and therapies [PATH Intl, 2018]. Additionally, PATH Intl is known for establishing and maintaining industry standards for equine-assisted activities and therapy (Hallberg, 2018). Interviews with equine specialists certified through PATH Intl explored the use of horses in activities and therapy in accordance with PATH Intl goals and standards, as well as provided a scholarly understanding of the terminology and clinical application of equine-assisted activities and therapy using the PATH Intl model.

Research Questions

Research Question 1 (RQ1): What are the experiences of PATH Intl certified equine specialists in providing equine assisted therapy and activities to their clients?

Research Question 2 (RQ2): What were the contributing factors in choosing PATH for certification in providing equine assisted therapy and activities?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework provides a worldview that is used to structure and explain a particular topic or phenomenon. Additionally, the conceptual framework provides a bridge aligning the context, theory, and the structure of a research study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). For this research study, I used constructivism as the conceptual framework to connect the meaning and experiences of therapists using the phenomenon of horses for mental health and wellness.

Constructivism is a theory about knowledge and learning with roots in psychology, philosophy, and science that describe knowledge as emergent and developmental constructions of meaning pertaining to a social or cultural phenomenon (Fosnot, 2005). Constructivism seeks to study the multiple realities constructed by people, as well as the implications of those constructions for their lives and interactions with others (Patton, 2002). Expounding upon the original theory developed by Jean Piaget, constructivism also asserts that meaning does not simply consist of knowledge and cognition, but it also has an adaptive function (Fosnot, 2005). In addition to the construction of thoughts, emotions are also constructed by people through their experiences, perceptions, and interactions with others (Crotty, 1998; Patton, 2002). Each of these elements of constructivism are key to exploring therapists' perspectives in using equine assisted activities and therapy for mental health and wellness.

Because equine-related intervention involves the interaction of one or more individuals with horses, it aligns well with constructivism. Certified therapists and equine specialists constructed their meanings of the phenomenon of using horses for mental

health and wellness, as well as why PATH Intl was chosen as the certifying organization by the participants. Therapists and equine specialists also expounded upon the goals, activities, and outcomes used in a typical therapy session. Additionally, therapists and equine specialists constructed meaning to the adaptive functions of horses and equine assisted activities and therapy as to how it is applicable to other aspects and relationships in the participants' lives. Horses have been used for many diverse purposes throughout history, so it is essential to ascribe meaning and the adaptive functions of horses for mental health and wellness. Emotions are also an important element of meaning in constructivism. As a result, equine specialists and therapists described the emotional aspects of using horses for mental health and wellness for participants, as well as themselves.

My focus for this research study was equine assisted activities and therapy for mental health and wellness. PATH Intl certified therapists and equine specialists provided their experiences incorporating interactions with horses for both themselves and participants for mental health and wellness. In Chapter 2, I detail information on the alignment of constructivism and equine-related interventions, and in Chapter 3, I describe information on the worldview of constructivism affects data analysis.

Nature of the Study

In this qualitative research study, I used a phenomenological analysis described by Patton (2002) to explore the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experiences of a particular phenomenon for a group of people . Quantitative research typically employs experimental methods and examines the relationship among variables to provide answers to research questions whereas qualitative findings develop from either in-depth,

open-ended interviews, direct observations, or written documents (Patton, 2002).

Phenomenological research theorists assert that qualitative investigations are enhanced by exploring the psychological study of phenomenon occurring in one's lifeworld, which was described by classic authors, such as Sartre and Heidegger (Ashworth, 2015).

Phenomenology was originally developed as a philosophical approach by Edmund Husserl, who formulated scientific methods to assist psychological researchers in the investigation of human experiences and behavior (Wertz, 2005). Phenomenology was later established as a major social science perspective through the work of Alfred Schutz (Patton, 2002). Researchers engaging in a phenomenological method assert that human beings know what they are experiencing by attending to the perceptions and meanings that awaken our conscious awareness (Patton, 2002). The individual person constructs a lifeworld that is uniquely relevant and meaningful to the self in conjunction with his or her individual histories (Wertz, 2005). Researchers using a phenomenological method also seek to discover the meaning and significance of certain phenomenon rather than simply viewing these occurrences as objective mechanisms of one's natural world (Ashworth, 2016). Phenomenological analysis can be used to gain an understanding of the daily experiences of equine specialists setting goals, planning activities, and evaluating outcomes of equine-assisted interventions.

I designed this phenomenological research study to understand the experiences, attitudes, and beliefs of certified equine specialists certified through PATH Intl regarding the use of horses for mental health and wellness, including the goals, activities, and outcomes of equine-assisted activities and therapy. The phenomenological approach was suited for this research study as it provided meaning and understanding of lived

experiences of therapists using equine-related interventions. Because there was limited research available on the experiences of PATH Intl certified equine specialists, a qualitative methodology was fitting as I was able to provide a more significant meaning and understanding to this unique, alternative therapeutic approach for psychology and counseling.

I collected data for this study via semistructured interviews with Path Intl certified equine specialists in order to gain in-depth knowledge and meanings regarding their experiences using horses in various activities and therapy. The sample size for this phenomenological study consisted of eight participants until data saturation was achieved. I selected the participants using purposeful sampling and recruitment from several equine therapy and counseling groups on social media websites and applications.

Definitions

The following definitions and terms were used in this research study and are defined below.

Adaptive Riding: Adaptive riding refers to a nontherapy type of equine-assisted activity that includes horseback riding and horsemanship skills to students with disabilities or special needs and is sometimes used synonymously with the term “therapeutic riding,” (Hallberg, 2018).

Animal-Assisted Activities: Animal-Assisted Activities refers to non-therapy services involving animals to focus on enhancing the quality of life (Hallberg, 2018). These services are not regulated by healthcare laws, ethics, or standards, but the animals used in the programs are sometimes certified through other organizations (Hallberg, 2018).

Animal-Assisted Therapy: Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) is part of a larger group described as “Animal-Assisted Interventions (AAI)” (Wilson, Buultjens, Monfries, & Karimi, 2017), and broadly refers to the inclusion of animals in services provided by licensed healthcare professionals (Hallberg, 2018). Services may be offered by physicians, physical therapists, speech therapist, nurses, or mental health professionals (Hallberg, 2018). AAT has been provided for a variety of clinical issues, including autism spectrum symptoms, various medical disorders, emotional difficulties, and trauma (Wilson et al., 2017). AAT is also described as a goal-directed intervention in which a therapy animal is an integral part of the therapy process to improve the quality of life (Dabelko-Schoeny et al., 2014).

Certificate of Completion: Certificates of completion are provided at the end of professional development training workshops or courses to indicate that the individual has successfully completed training or a method-specific training program (Hallberg, 2018).

Credentials: Credentialing is the process of a third party validating the education, experience, qualifications, and competency of an individual (Hallberg, 2018). The credentialing process requires a separation between education, such as a college degree, and a credentialing organization, as credentialing bodies do not align with specific methodological knowledge (Hallberg, 2018). State-issued licenses or industry-approved certifications are examples of credentials (Hallberg, 2018).

EAGALA Model of Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy: This approach to equine-assisted mental health, which is provided by a licensed mental health professional also certified by EAGALA, is a methodologically specific and activities-based approach

(Hallberg, 2018). The EAGALA model is a team approach that includes a licensed mental health professional, certified equine specialist, and horses working together with a client at all times in the arena that includes a hands-on approach to project and analyze situations, make connections, and find solutions using groundwork rather than horseback riding [EAGALA, 2019].

Equine-Assisted Activities: Equine-Assisted Activities (EAA) refers to non-therapy services that includes horses and a focus on teaching skills and improving quality of life (Hallberg, 2018). EAA includes therapeutic horseback riding, vaulting, and carriage driving, as well as non-riding activities with the horse (Lanning et al., 2014).

Equine-Assisted Activities and Therapy: Equine-Assisted Activities and Therapy (EAAT) refers to a wide range of activities and therapy that engaged individuals in a variety of horse-related activities, including grooming, handling, riding, lunging, driving, vaulting, and team building with the goal of improving cognitive, emotional, social, behavioral, and equestrian skills (Alfonso, Alfonso, Llabre, & Fernandez, 2015). EAAT is an umbrella term that also includes non-therapy activities, such as adaptive riding or equine-assisted learning (Hallberg, 2018).

Equine-Assisted Counseling: Equine-Assisted Counseling (EAC) is the incorporation of horses into the counseling process to facilitate therapeutic outcomes (Trotter, 2008). It is an equine mental health service provided by licensed mental health professionals using present-moment-focus, skills-based, problem-solving skills that includes horses and other farm-based activities (Hallberg, 2018).

Equine-Assisted Learning: Equine-Assisted Learning (EAL) is a broad term describing non-therapy, skills-based services that focus on teaching life skills,

communication skills, relationship skills, social skills, or leadership skills with personal growth and self-awareness through mounted and non-mounted activities with horses (Hallberg, 2018).

Equine-Assisted Mental Health: Any term used to describe any type of mental health service, including psychology, counseling, psychotherapy, and social work, in which a licensed mental health professional provides mental health services with the incorporation of horses (Hallberg, 2018). Equine-assisted mental health is a type of equine-assisted therapy, and it is sometimes used synonymously with “equine-assisted psychotherapy” (Hallberg, 2018).

Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy: Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) describes a collaborative team approach between an equine specialist and a mental health professional that includes the use of horses to work with clients with the purpose of reaching treatment goals (Lee and Makela, 2018). The term is commonly used synonymously with “equine-assisted mental health,” (Hallberg, 2018, p. 7).

Equine-Assisted Therapy: Equine-assisted therapy is a broad term referring to any type of therapy or treatment that includes equine-related interactions or activities (Hallberg, 2018). It is an umbrella term used to describe different programs using horses for human benefit, including mental health, education, hippotherapy, and therapeutic riding (Lac, 2014; Trotter, 2012). Equine-assisted therapy is part of the larger industry of “equine-assisted activities and therapy,” which treats conditions ranging from cerebral palsy to posttraumatic stress disorder (Hallberg, 2018).

Equine-Facilitated Therapy: Equine-facilitated therapy (EFT) is a form of AAT involving horses that adopts a client-focused approach to therapy encouraging self-

exploration of thoughts, feelings, emotions, behaviors, problem-solving skills, and self-awareness of maladaptive behaviors (McNamara, 2017). The nonverbal behavior of horses serves as projection and a frame of reference for metaphors to help the client work through difficulties (McNamara, 2017). EFT is sometimes referred to as *equine-facilitated psychotherapy*, which is an equine-assisted approach to mental health that also includes creative arts and mindfulness activities (Hallberg, 2018).

Assumptions

I assumed that the participants in the research study met the criteria for the research study because the criteria was provided through self-report by the potential participants. Each participant had to be a certified equine specialist certified through the PATH Intl.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this research study included the experiences of certified equine specialists certified through PATH Intl. Their experiences included their attitudes toward the PATH Intl model and mission statement in conjunction with equine activities and therapy. Their experiences also included a description of the activities, goals, and outcomes used in their equine therapy and counseling programs.

I chose PATH Intl as the certifying organization for equine specialists for this research study because there is limited information available on the perspectives and experiences of therapists certified in equine-related activities using their standards and criteria. The majority of previously conducted research studies have focused on the EAGALA model for qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research studies.

There are several organizations worldwide that provide certification programs for certifications in equine-related interventions. The study was limited to PATH Intl certified equine specialists because it is essential to gain the experiences of each organization in individual research studies. Each organization has its own mission statement, standards, goals, and measurement of outcomes. By limiting the research study to one certifying organization that serves diverse populations and mental health and wellness through a variety of equine-related activities is more aligned with the goals of phenomenology and constructivism. Therefore, a more comprehensive understanding and meaning of using horses in mental health and wellness is provided through the focus of one organization.

Because the nature of this study is a qualitative methodology, the results of the study may be transferable to other certifying organizations. Additionally, the research study has the potential to be replicated by using the same methodology and framework to explore the experiences and perspectives of equine specialists certified through other credentialed organizations.

Limitations

The goal of this research study was to describe the experiences and perceptions of PATH Intl certified equine specialists regarding the use of horses for mental health and wellness for diverse populations. The experiences of the therapists also included the activities, goals, and outcomes of using equine-related interventions in their programs. However, limitations in the research study included limited diversity and multiculturalism and potential researcher bias.

Because I have owned horses for nearly two decades and desires a future career in equine-related interventions, a potential limitation for this study was researcher bias. I have also been studying the use of horses as a potential means of alternative therapy in psychology and counseling for approximately ten years and has become very passionate about this type of intervention. Researcher bias is further depicted in Chapter 3.

Another potential limitation in the research study is the lack of empirical support for equine-related interventions. Equine-assisted activities and therapy are currently lacking in an empirical, theoretical framework (Trotter, 2012). Although potential participants will be able to provide information regarding their experiences and perceptions regarding equine-related interventions, they may not be able to provide an empirical, theoretical support for their chosen activities, goals, and outcomes.

Significance of the Study

The development of clear best practices with equine interventions contributes to the well-being of many people. Exploring the roles of equine interventions will attest to the diverse uses of equine interventions in conjunction with various theoretical foundations in psychology and counseling for individuals, groups and populations; its contributions to mental and physical health and wellness; and multicultural sensitivity. Equine interventions contribute to positive social change for both horses and humans. Bringing together horses and humans provides the application of an alternative strategy to traditional therapeutic measures, connects humans with nature, gives horses a new purpose, and addresses multicultural issues in therapy. Horses can be trained to be used in therapeutic equine interventions, which gives them worth, dignity, and horses a new purpose rather than unwanted expenses on society. Horses are also a therapeutic

resource for different cultures and groups of people, as well as a new connection for humans and nature. Equine interventions have the potential to provide healing for humans, horses and the promotion of positive social change.

Significance to Practice

Exploring the patterns of using horses as a therapeutic approach will bridge the gap between scholarly research for equine-assisted activities and therapy and personal beliefs and opinions of using horses in therapy (Hallberg, 2018). The exploration of the experiences of PATH Intl certified equine specialists provides further insight and scholarly research for a specific model of using horses as a therapeutic approach, a model different from the more studied EAGALA model.

Significance to Theory

Proponents of equine-facilitated activities and therapies suggest that the use of horses in therapy provides clients with an interactive and multisensory approach not otherwise available in traditional therapies (Schroeder & Stroud, 2015). Equine intervention is an innovative and growing mental health approach consisting of a collaborative team method between horses and therapists to help clients reach treatment goals (Lee & Makela, 2018). Incorporating horses into therapy offers a unique and innovative approach that provides an opportunity to enhance traditional therapy that comprises client and therapist (Bachi et al., 2011).

Significance to Social Change

Equine-assisted interventions contribute to positive social change for both horses and humans. Social change is a deliberate process of creating and applying ideas, strategies, and actions to promote the worth, dignity, and development of individuals,

cultures, and societies, which results in the improvement of human and social conditions (Walden University, 2017). Bringing together horses and humans provides the application of a multicultural, alternative approach to traditional therapeutic measures that connects humans with nature. Further research provides insight into the various dimensions of equine approaches in counseling and therapy (Johns et al., 2016). Also, there is a lack of empirical research about specific strategies using horses in therapy. A research study focused on the components of the PATH model of equine-assisted activities and therapy as experienced by PATH-certified equine specialists provides insight, structure, and patterns for incorporating horses into therapeutic activities.

Positive social change is also important for horses. There are approximately 200,000 unwanted horses annually in the United States, and many of these horses are shipped to slaughter in foreign countries, enter rescue facilities, or are held on federal lands (Weiss et al., 2017). Incorporating horses into therapy gives horses a new purpose, as well as decreases the number of unwanted horses.

Horses are also effective in social change because they can be used as a therapeutic resource with different cultures and groups of people. Horses have been used throughout human history for a variety of purposes and have been a part of all cultural groups (Billany, 2013). When horses interact with humans, they do not see race, ethnicity, or culture. The horse is nonjudgmental and motivational, which is an effective concept in building confidence, as well as a trusting relationship with both the horse and therapist (Kern-Godal et al., 2016). Therefore, equine interventions promote positive social change by offering a diverse, alternative therapy that is applicable to all cultural

groups. It promotes feelings of worth and dignity, as well as improvements to social and economic conditions.

Summary

Understanding the lived experiences of PATH Intl certified equine specialists is part of the greater understanding of the incorporation of horses into activities for mental health and wellness. Through this understanding, both humans and horses can be given a new purpose and be on a path to healing and wellness. I will discuss the following topics in Chapter 2: literature search strategies, the conceptual framework, the history and descriptions of the certifying entities discussed in the literature, diverse populations and mental health issues that have used equine-related interventions for mental health and wellness, and a review of the research methods used by the researchers that produced the literature.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Humans have interacted with horses throughout history in a variety of ways. Historical sources suggest that horses were viewed as healing or therapeutic for humans since the time of the early Greeks (Hallberg, 2018). According to recent literature, horses continue to be suitable to therapy and counseling for several reasons (McNamara, 2017). Equine-related interventions have grown in popularity and employ a wide diversity of practices (DeSantis et al., 2017), as well as an innovative and emerging approach to mental health treatment (Lee, Dakin, and McClure, 2014). Equine-related interventions refers to a wide-range of activities and therapies that use horses in learning and therapy to improve cognitive, behavioral, emotional, social, and equestrian skills by engaging participants in diverse activities, such as grooming, handling, riding, driving, and teambuilding (Alfonso et al., 2015).

Although equine-related interventions have experienced a surge in popularity as a viable treatment option, there is a notable gap between the outcomes of scholarly research and the personal passions, beliefs, and practices that are prevalent in accessible literature (Hallberg, 2018). Additionally, equine-related interventions include a variety of activities, goals, and approaches, which has led to an inconsistent use of terminology and challenges in both practice and research for those interested in the field (Hallberg, 2018). Consequently, there is no single theoretical foundation or structure supporting the use of equine-related interventions for various physical and mental health conditions (McNamara, 2017). Although much research also attests to the beneficial effects of equine-related interventions for physical development and abilities, there is a lack of

research depicting the psychological benefits of horse-related activities (Kendall et al., 2015).

In the absence of a collaborative and mutually-agreed upon framework and psychological benefits for equine-related interventions, reviewing the history of the use of horses for therapy and healing, as well as the programs offered by current credentialing organizations, can provide a more comprehensive understanding of equine-related interventions as a viable treatment option. In the following chapter, I will explore scholarly research about equine-related interventions, beginning with the literature search strategy, which is followed by the conceptual framework employed by this study. The chapter also includes a brief history of the use of horses as therapeutic and healing entities for humans, an overview of credentialing and certificate programs for equine-related interventions, a review of the research methods and organizations used in the literature, and a conclusion with a summary of the chapter.

Literature Search Strategy

To search for literature, I used extensive searches in the PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, and the Psychology Databases Combined Search provided by the Walden University Library, as well as the use of professional books from the researcher's personal collection. Extensive information was also found on the websites for PATH Intl and EAGALA, as well as various organizations, groups, and sources that currently provide equine-related interventions for mental health and wellness.

The literature search strategy consisted of several terms related to *equine*, including *horse*, *horses*, and *equestrian*. Other terms that I used in the search strategy were *equine counseling*, *equine-assisted counseling*, and *equine therapy*. As I continued

the literature search process, I noted other key terms, such as *psychotherapy*, *gestalt*, and *cognitive behavioral* were added to the search terms. Exploring the literature resulted in more search terms, including *equine-facilitated learning*, *equine-assisted activities and therapy*, *equine-facilitated psychotherapy*, and *equine-assisted psychotherapy*.

Additionally, I noted the focus of key terms on the use of horses as a therapeutic modality for specific mental health issues. I added terms such as *autism*, *posttraumatic stress disorder*, *attention deficit hyperactivity disorder*, and *trauma* to the literature search strategy. Finally, specific populations were added to the literature search and included the terms *women*, *children*, *adolescents*, *inmates*, and *at-risk youth*.

Research related to equine-related interventions connects to several different fields, including psychology, education, and social work. I used Psychology-related databases, including PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, and the Psychology Databases Combined Search were used most frequently to gather empirical, peer-review articles for research about equine-related interventions and therapies. Other databases used in the literature search strategy included the Academic Search Complete and Thoreau. The research process initially commenced in 2014 for completion of the Capstone for the Master of Science in Psychology Program at Walden University. I did not limit the dates in the initial search of publications in the databases in order to gain the history of equine therapy and counseling. However, in order to use current research in the Capstone research, the date range for peer-reviewed, scholarly articles was 2008–2014. Throughout the doctoral program, research continued using the same key terms and databases described above in order to research equine-related interventions. However, I modified

the date range to the years 2012–2018 to reflect new research studies on equine-related interventions in psychology and counseling.

I also conducted research in the Walden University Dissertations Database to explore dissertations previously completed by Walden University students on topics related to equine counseling and therapy. I searched for key terms in the Dissertations Databases consisted of several terms related to *equine*, including *horse*, *equine-assisted counseling*, *equine-assisted psychotherapy*, *equine-facilitated learning*, and *equine-facilitated psychotherapy*. I focused on various equine organizations, including *EAGALA* and *Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship* in order to determine if any prior dissertations had focused specifically on these organizations as part of the research study.

Several books have also been published about equine-related interventions. Two books that were instrumental in the literature search strategy were *The Clinical Practice of Equine-Assisted Therapy: Including Horses in Human Healthcare* by Leif Hallberg and *Harnessing the Power of Equine-Assisted Counseling: Adding Animal-Assisted Therapy to Your Practice* by Kay Sudekum Trotter. Additionally, I conducted further research via the websites for PATH Intl, EAGALA, the Horses and Humans Research Foundation, CORRAL Riding Academy, the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation, and the Wild Horse Inmate Program (WHIP).

Research studies have attested to the use of horses in healing and therapy. In a study of therapists using equine-related interventions with adolescents, Wilson et al.(2017) found that improved self-control and emotional regulation were positive outcomes, as well as the assertion that equine-related interventions had the capacity to

provide benefits in a shorter-period of time than other modes of therapy. Therapists interviewed in a study by Johns, Bobat, and Holder (2016) also indicated that equine-related interventions are a more flexible and effective treatment modality than traditional office bound therapies. Research has also indicated that therapy involving horses may yield a variety of benefits, including self-confidence, communication, trust, assertiveness, and the reduction of anxiety (Frederick et al., 2015).

Although equine-related interventions have experienced a surge in popularity as a viable treatment option, there is a notable gap between the outcomes of scholarly research and the personal passions, beliefs, and practices that are prevalent in accessible literature (Hallberg, 2018). Consequently, there is no single theoretical foundation or structure supporting the use of equine-related interventions for various physical and mental health conditions (McNamara, 2017).

Conceptual Framework

I used a constructivist framework to explore how equine specialists constructed the meanings and realities of their experiences using equine-related interventions in psychology and counseling. Constructivism is a strong conceptual framework to understand the construction, meanings, and perceptions of equine-related interventions as described by equine specialists and therapists. Constructivism is founded on the concept that people construct meanings, perceptions, truths, beliefs, and worldviews based on specific settings and interactions with others (Patton, 2002).

The constructivist approach also analyzes multiple participant meanings, as well as the development of subjective meanings of experiences as people seek to understand

the world in which they live and work. The constructivist perspective leads to the development of subjective meanings of their own experiences (Patton, 2002).

Constructivism is defined as the meaning-making activity of the mind and postulates the unique experiences of each of us (Crotty, 1998; Patton, 2002). These concepts were initially developed from the late 1960s works of Klaus Holzkamp, who promoted constructivism as the new philosophy of science (Teo, 2000). Holzkamp claimed that psychological experiments only vaguely represented the theories they supposedly tested, and as a result, he proposed a new system of general definitions of human subjectivity that pronounced psychology research as subject oriented (Teo, 2000).

Constructivism also has roots in the early philosophical work of Immanuel Kant. Kant asserted that the human mind is an active originator of experience rather than a passive recipient of an outside intervention (Castiglioni, 2011). Modern views of constructivist theory were developed by George Kelly. Kelly (1995) proclaimed in his *personal construct theory*, that constructivism is a departure from classic logic and is linked to intuitionism (Castiglioni, 2011).

Constructivism is about knowledge and learning (Fosnot, 2005) and consists of the study of the multiple realities constructed by people and the implications of those constructs in connection to their lives (Patton, 2002). Knowledge arises from actions and participants' reflections of these actions, which occur in environments that constitute the participants' experiential world (Fosnot, 2005). A constructivist approach embraces the exploration of therapists' perspectives so that the meaning of horse and human interaction can be further empirically supported as a therapeutic measure.

Additionally, Crotty (1998) declared that humans not only construct thoughts but also emotions. An individual's sense of self and ability to trust are also directly influenced through the connection with horses (Trotter, 2012). Constructivists embrace subjectivity as a pathway toward a deeper understanding of the specific phenomena they are examining (Patton, 2002).

Both participants and therapists engaged in equine-assisted activities and therapies must construct meaning through these interactions. In this research study, I specifically explored the experiences of equine specialists certified through the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship with a focus of setting goals, planning activities, and evaluating outcomes of equine-assisted activities and therapies. The constructivist approach asserts that different stakeholders, such as certified equine therapists, would have different experiences and perspectives of the program, which attempts to be captured through open-ended interviews and observations (Patton, 2002).

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

Equine-related interventions refer to any type of therapy or treatment plan that includes the use of horses for various activities (Hallberg, 2018). The use of equine-related interventions for diverse populations, as well as issues in mental health and wellness, has been explored in several research studies.

Researchers have explored equine-related interventions with specific populations, such as at-risk youth, female victims of interpersonal violence, and prison-based programs, such as The Thoroughbred Foundation's Second Chances Program, and the Wild Horse Inmate Program (WHIP).

Equine-related interventions also address a variety of mental health conditions and human development needs, including depression, anxiety, behavior issues, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), substance abuse, relationship problems, and communication needs (Trotter, 2012). Research has also indicated that therapy involving horses may yield a variety of benefits, including self-confidence, communication, trust, assertiveness, and the reduction of anxiety (Frederick et al., 2015). Additionally, therapists interviewed in a study by Johns, Bobat, and Holder (2016) also indicated that equine-related interventions are a more flexible and effective treatment modality than traditional office bound therapies.

Therapy practices that include horses in human healthcare have continued to grow and is currently practiced in over 50 countries around the world (Hallberg, 2018). Several organizations, such as EAGALA and the PATH Intl, provide membership and certifications, as well as goals, activities, and the evaluation of outcomes for equine-related activities.

While research studies depict the goals, activities, and outcomes of equine-related interventions for diverse populations and mental health issues, few cite the incorporation of specific models for equine-related interventions. Many studies also explore the perceptions, experiences, and outcomes of participants in equine-related interventions, but few studies explore the perceptions and experiences of therapists' incorporating a specific model of equine-related interventions for various populations and mental health issues. The following literature review provides the history and background of incorporating horses into healing and therapy, a description of the equine-related

intervention groups described in key studies, and a summary of the populations and mental health issues using equine-related interventions.

The History of Using Horses for Healing and Therapy

The practice of having horses as social companions can be found in all historical periods and across all cultures (Billany, 2012). Although horses have served many purposes for humans throughout history, references to the healing and recovery processes using horses can be found in writings by Oribasius, Galen, and others from ancient Greco-Roman times (Bachi, Terkel, & Teichman, 2011). Hippocrates believed that horseback riding provided a healing rhythm, and medical literature throughout the 15th through 18th centuries provides accounts from European physicians asserting the psychological and physiological benefits of riding horses (Hallberg, 2018).

The first reported study on the effects of horseback riding for human health was published by Chassignac in 1870, which was followed 8 years later by a book authored by Ghislani Durant depicting the benefits of horseback riding from a medical perspective (Hallberg, 2018). The use of horses as a healing entity continued through World War I as returning British soldiers were paired with horses for rehabilitative purposes (Hallberg, 2018).

Norwegian physical therapist, Eilset Bodther developed horseback riding activities for children with disabilities in the 1940s (Hallberg, 2018). However, the pioneer of therapeutic horseback riding in the 1950s was Lis Hartel, who was paralyzed from the knees down after contracting polio (Bachi, Terkel, & Teichman, 2011; Hallberg, 2018). Hartel represented Denmark in the 1952 Helsinki Olympics and won the silver medal. Shortly afterward, Hartel partnered with Danish physical therapist, Ulla Harpoth,

to form the first therapeutic riding center for people with disabilities in Europe (Hallberg, 2018). During the 1950s and 1960s, other rehabilitative riding programs were formed throughout the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Belgium (Hallberg, 2018).

The concept of the therapeutic benefits of horses for humans continued in North America in the late 1960s with the development of the Community Association for Riders with Disabilities (CARD) in Canada, which was founded by Dr. Reginald Renaud and Mr. Joseph Bauer, and the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association in the United States (Hallberg, 2018).

In 1969, the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA) was established, and in 2011 became known as the Professional Association for Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH Intl). EAGALA was founded in 1999. The models and standards established and upheld by both organizations have been noted and used in recent literature exploring the physiological and psychological benefits of equine-related interventions for diverse populations and mental health issues.

Physiological Benefits of Equine-Related Interventions

Most references to equine therapy emphasize physiological aspects (Bachi, Terkel, & Teichman, 2011), as well as physical development and ability (Kendall et al., 2015). The early history of including horses in human healthcare asserts Hippocrates' belief in the rhythmic healing of horseback riding, and Ghislani Durant's book published in the late 1800s depicting the benefits of horseback riding from a medical perspective (Hallberg, 2018).

Medical doctors have referred patients for several equine-related interventions to address the specific needs of each client (Alfonso et al., 2015). Physical, occupational,

and speech therapies have been included in equine-related interventions for various issues (Hallberg, 2018). For example, clients with cerebral palsy may benefit from riding a horse to increase balance, coordination, gross motor functioning, and other physical and neurological functioning (Alfonso et al., 2015). Additionally, equine-related interventions encourage the self-exploration of thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, which attests to its ability to be used as an effective psychological treatment option (McNamara, 2017).

Psychological Benefits of Equine-Related Interventions

Involvement of animals as part of a psychological therapeutic process remained absent from professional literature until the 1960s when B.M. Levinson first proposed that interactions with animals can influence the human personality (Bachi, Terkel, & Teichman, 2011). Modern research studies show the inclusion of psychotherapy in equine-related interventions with a focus on social and mental aspects (Bachi, Terkel, & Teichman, 2011).

Researchers and practitioners have spent more than a decade studying the impact of equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP) on a variety of populations, including children, adolescents, adult men and women, and the elderly (Whittlesey-Jerome, 2014). Equine-related interventions have also demonstrated positive outcomes for treating veterans with mental health issues (Ferruolo, 2015), as well patients with substance use disorder. Other research studies have explored therapists' perspectives on equine-assisted activities and therapy. As a result, the incorporation of horses into mental health treatment is a rapidly growing innovation in psychology and counseling (Lee, Dakin, & McLure, 2016).

Children and Adolescents: At-Risk Youth

Quantitative studies conducted by Bachi, Terkel, and Teichman (2011) and Frederick, Hatz, and Lanning (2015) describe the goals of equine assisted activities and therapy for children and adolescents described as at-risk youth. Bachi et al. (2015) studied fourteen at-risk adolescents participating in equine facilitated psychotherapy (EFP) with weekly individual sessions over a period of seven months with the goal of improving self-image, self-control, trust, and general life satisfaction. The results, which were measured by a set of questionnaires administered prior to the therapy and at the end of the year, revealed an increase in trust, higher levels of improved self-control, and increased levels of self-image.

Likewise, Frederick et al. (2015) focused on the impact of equine assisted activities and therapy on levels of hope and depression for at-risk youth. The variables of hope and depression were measured by the *Adolescent Domain-Specific Hope Scale* (ADSHS) and the *Major Depression Inventory* (MDI). Frederick et al. (2015) conducted a five-week intervention using an equine learning curriculum, *Leading Adolescents to Successful School Outcomes* (LASSO), to assess the impact of equine-assisted learning on levels of hope and depression in at-risk adolescents. The twenty-six participants were middle or high school students at a charter school in Texas who were randomly assigned to the treatment and control groups via a lottery system. The researchers concluded through repeated ANOVA measures that participants' levels of hope and depression showed statistically significant improvements after engaging in the equine learning program. Although researchers concluded that at-risk youth were positively impacted by the short-term equine learning experience, they noted several limitations, including the

small sample size and convenience sampling, limited generalizability, and self-report measures. Future research studies should include larger, more diverse samples, and the investigation of other measures, such as grades or classroom behaviors. Overall, these research studies demonstrated a decrease in negative psychological aspects, such as anxiety and depression, and increases in psychological well-being, including hope, trust, self-control, and self-image.

Additionally, Gibbons et al. (2016) conducted a mixed-methods research study consisting of 37 vulnerable Guatemalan youth participating in a two-day equine workshop. Participants completed quantitative measures of leadership, emotion regulation, aggression, and interpersonal response to threat, including the *Youth Leadership Life Skills Development* (YLLSD), the *Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory* (TRIM), the *Normative Beliefs about Aggression Scale* (NBAS), the *Emotion Regulation Questionnaire* (ERQ), and the *Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire* (CERQ), which were administered as pre-tests and post-tests. Qualitative measurements in the study consisted of participant focus groups, in which the participants shared improvement in emotion regulation, empowerment, and positive emotion. The quantitative measures demonstrated that equine-related interventions have the potential to provide youth with tools of leadership, reduced violence and aggression. However, the quantitative results were non-significant regarding changes in the regulation of emotion, yet the qualitative results provided self-reported improvements in emotional regulation (Gibbons et al., 2016). Additionally, the researchers found evidence for the effectiveness of equine-related interventions in changing the attitudes and behaviors of at-risk Guatemalan adolescents. Researchers suggested that future research studies include a

larger, non-homogeneous sample size so that results are more generalizable to other populations.

Children and Adolescents: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

Additionally, Jang et al. (2015) conducted a quantitative study to investigate the clinical effects of equine assisted activities and therapy for treating attention deficit hyperactivity disorder in children and adolescents, ages 6-13. Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is considered to be one of the most prevalent neurodevelopmental disorders in school-aged children with a well-established efficacy of medications for treatment (Jang et al., 2015). However, although medications may improve core symptoms of ADHD, uncomfortable common side effects have been reported (Jang et al., 2015). Equine assisted activities and therapy may provide a nonpharmaceutical approach to the management of ADHD symptoms (Jang et al., 2015). A 12-week study was conducted to investigate the clinical effects of equine-assisted activities and therapy for treating ADHD in 20 children, ages 6-13 years (Jang et al., 2015).

Previous research studies that investigated using horses for treatment of ADHD explored the changes in behavior, social problems, and motor function, but this study evaluated the effects of equine assisted activities and therapy on both social and behavioral problems, as well as core symptoms of ADHD, such as impulsivity, inattention, and hyperactivity (Jang et al., 2015). The results demonstrated that interacting with horses effectively improved the core ADHD symptoms in children in addition to having a positive effect on social problems. The researchers attributed these positive outcomes to the physical aspect of working with horses, which increases

dopamine and helps to regulate emotion in the hippocampus. Also, the strength of the research study was that the children participating in the research study were not taking any medication.

Children and Adolescents: Autism Spectrum Disorder

Lanning et al. (2014) conducted a longitudinal, quasi-experimental study to determine if a twelve-week equine assisted activities and therapy program positively affected the quality of life for children with ASD. Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) includes autistic disorder, Asperger's disorder, childhood disintegrative disorder, and pervasive developmental disorder (Lanning et al., 2014). In this research study, the treatment group consisted of 13 children with ASD, ages 4- 15 years, participated in equine assisted activities and therapy groups in two locations. The comparison group consisted of 12 children diagnosed with ASD who participated in social circles. Results from the study supported the proposed hypothesis that children diagnosed with ASD who participate in equine assisted activities and therapy will demonstrate improvement of quality of life domains (Lanning et al., 2014). Additionally, although positive changes were noted in both groups, the children participating in the equine programs demonstrated greater improvement in general behavior in comparison to the control group (Lanning et al., 2014).

Elderly: Dementia

DaBelko-Schoeny et al. (2014) conducted a study to determine the feasibility and effectiveness of using guided interactions with horses as a nonpharmaceutical intervention to improve the physiological and behavioral states of individuals with dementia. The number of individuals diagnosed with Alzheimer's Disease (AD) has

increased significantly over the last decade (DaBelko-Schoeny et al., 2014). Animal-assisted therapies have been previously used in nursing homes for older adults for the purpose of rehabilitation, but specifically for older persons with dementia, therapy animals have been effective in reducing agitated behavior, decreasing verbal aggression and anxiety, and increasing social interaction (Dabelko-Schoeny et al., 2014). The convenience sample for this research study consisted of 16 older adults with dementia recruited from an adult day health center. The researchers used randomized pre-test and post-test design to compare participants receiving equine interventions with participants receiving regular treatment. The results demonstrated that equine interventions are feasible and potentially beneficial for adults with AD or other related dementia disorder.

Women: Psychological Well-Being

Billany (2012) explored the salutogenic approach for women interacting with horses for psychological well-being. Using an ethnographic approach, Billany conducted a study consisting of nine female participants from a rural community in New Zealand using the focus group method. Thematic analysis was used to determine three major themes from interactions with horses, including authenticity, engagement, and empowerment. Billany (2012) concluded that horses provide opportunities for women to adapt and self-manage when facing emotional, social, and physical challenges, which also contributed to the development of growth-fostering relationships with other humans. Future research should include a wider demographic population.

Women: Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

Schroeder and Stroud (2015) studied the benefits of equine interventions for female victims of interpersonal violence who demonstrated symptoms of posttraumatic

stress disorder. Women survivors of interpersonal violence face challenges to their psychological well-being and are at increased risk for the development of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Schroeder & Stroud, 2015). The research study used equine-related interventions to assist women survivors of interpersonal violence with posttraumatic symptom management and other interpersonal difficulties. The study was a time-limited group comprised of four women ranging in age from mid-twenties to early-sixties, which took place at a PATH Intl accredited center for nine weeks. Although the women did not engage in horseback riding, they developed relationships with the horses through ground-based activities, such as grooming and leading (Schroeder & Stroud, 2015). The results demonstrated that equine interventions have the potential to provide valuable opportunities for female victims of interpersonal violence to manage symptoms of PTSD through the development of new skills, such as self-awareness, distress tolerance, and developing positive interpersonal relationships (Schroeder & Stroud, 2015).

Additionally, Whittlesey-Jerome (2014) examined the impact of the EAGALA model equine-assisted psychotherapy on self-efficacy for 13 adult female victims of interpersonal violence in an exploratory, mixed methods study. The results of the research study were conclusive with other studies, noting that participants in the equine groups improved not only in self-efficacy but also depression, anxiety, and global assessment of functioning.

Women: Social Anxiety

The literature also depicted several mixed methods studies for equine-related interventions for diverse populations and mental health issues, which included a variety

of goals, activities, and outcomes. For example, Alfonso et al. (2015) created Project Stride to study the effects of equine interventions in reducing symptoms of social anxiety in young women, ages 18-29. The researchers describe Project Stride as a brief, six-session intervention combining equine-assisted activities and cognitive-behavioral strategies to reduce symptoms of social anxiety. Participants were recruited using active and passive approaches, such as posting flyers at universities, bookstores, and coffee houses. Women who were interested in participating had three criteria for eligibility, including self-reported symptoms of social anxiety, falling between the ages of 18-29, and the provision of informed consent. Symptoms of the social anxiety were assessed using the *Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale*. Twelve participants were randomly assigned to Project Stride, which was held at Good Hope Equestrian Center. Project Stride consisted of three modules, which consisted of approximately two-hour sessions. The goals of the three modules included equine-assisted activities and therapy to help participants develop new relationships, express feelings and emotions effectively, and nurture and sustain relationships. The results demonstrated significant reductions in social anxiety for participants in equine interventions.

Experiencing trauma and adverse childhood experiences is also common among children and adolescents in the United States, which manifests into developmental, emotional, behavioral, cognitive, psychosocial disorders, and PTSD (McCullough et al., 2015). An eight-week pilot study using equine facilitated psychotherapy as an experiential, cognitive-based interventions was conducted by McCullough et al. (2015) for the treatment of PTSD for maltreated youth. The study design was a quantitative, quasi-experimental, repeated measures study in which participants were tested at the

beginning of the study, the four-week midpoint, and at the end of the intervention. Due to the youth needed for this research study being a vulnerable population, the sample was comprised of participants from McCullough's equine program. The results of the investigation suggest that using horses in therapy can be effective in lowering PTSD symptoms in maltreated children and teens.

Veterans: Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

Ferruolo (2015) created a pilot study using equine facilitated mental health for combat veterans experiencing anxiety, depression, and other psychological symptoms related to PTSD. The findings implied that equine-related interventions are also effective for combat veterans who are demonstrating psychological issues. nearly half of all combat veterans also suffer from psychological issues, including PTSD (Ferruolo, 2015). Diagnosis of psychological disorders in military personnel has witnessed a 65 percent increase since 2011 (Ferruolo, 2015).

Adults: Substance Use Disorder

There is also a continuous struggle to find treatment modalities that motivate substance use disorder (SUD) patients to remain in treatment for a sufficient time in order to produce beneficial change (Kern-Godal et al., 2016). Kern-Godal et al. (2016) investigated the effects of horse-assisted therapies (HAT) in substance use disorder (SUD) treatment for eight participants from a treatment facility in a mixed methods study. Researchers utilized a phenomenological approach and thematic analysis to understand how participants constructed and interpreted their experiences of the patient-horse relationship as part of SUD therapy. Findings demonstrate that the patient-horse

relationship may facilitate positive attachments, reflective functioning, and emotional regulation.

Therapists' Perspectives

Other research studies focused on the goals of equine assisted activities and therapy for children and adolescents through a qualitative lens. Research exploring therapists' perspectives of equine-related interventions has provided diverse descriptions of the goals, activities, and outcomes of equine-assisted activities and therapy. For example, Lee and Makela (2018) used a constructive narrative approach to make sense of the experiences and the construction of meaning in the perspectives of eight mental health practitioners using equine interventions. This approach was to provide insight for the therapists' perspectives and experiences of how the use of horses in therapy can be beneficial to the goals and outcomes in social work, education, and research. In-depth interviews were the primary data collection method. Each participant was interviewed twice to enable the questions to be answered in depth and to gain further insights. The findings included descriptions of the practitioners' cognitive activities and strategies used in equine interventions.

Likewise, Wilson, Buultjens, Monfries, and Karimi (2017) conducted an Australian-based qualitative study to examine the perspectives of eight therapists certified through EAGALA. A phenomenological framework was utilized to create knowledge and understanding of the lived experiences of individuals in regard to the phenomenon of equine assisted psychotherapy (EAP). This qualitative research study was conducted in Victoria and New South Wales, Australia among therapists registered with EAGALA and were offering EAP to adolescents diagnosed with anxiety and/or depression (Wilson et

al., 2017). The findings of the research study suggested a range of improvements for adolescent clients, including increases in confidence, self-esteem, and assertiveness, as well as a decrease in undesirable behaviors (Wilson et al., 2017). Limitations in the research study included a lack of understanding in the wider community about the functions and benefits of EAP, as well as the therapists' self-reported experiences with their use of EAP (Wilson et al., 2017). The researchers suggested that future research studies utilize a quantitative methodology and assessments to further demonstrate the efficacy of EAP.

McNamara (2017) also conducted a qualitative pilot study in Australia to explore the clinical practices of equine facilitated therapy (EFT) for children and adolescents, ages 7-17, using EAGALA framework. The author conducted semistructured interviews with ten mental health professionals and equine specialists. Research concluded that equine facilitated therapy using the EAGALA method reveals a strong emphasis on problem-solving skills. However, there is a lack of consistency in the therapeutic delivery of the EAGALA model. Future considerations include the development of a theoretically sound model for treatment approaches.

Anecdotal Literature

Equine-related interventions for diverse populations and mental disorders are becoming increasingly popular, but they have been subjected to limited systematic investigation (Anestis, Anestis, Zawilinski, Hopkins, & Lilienfeld, 2014). The literature consisted of two systematic reviews conducted by Anestis et al., (2014) and Kendall et al., (2015) to review literature describing the efficacy of equine-related interventions for mental health and psychological outcomes. Anestis et al. (2014) conducted a systematic

review of 14 peer-reviewed studies examining the efficacy and effectiveness of equine-related interventions for mental health disorders or other closely related outcomes that consisted of an experimental protocol. The researchers noted three common violations threatening the validity of the research studies, including a lack of appropriate experimental controls, a lack of proper experimental procedures necessary to test treatment outcomes, and a lack of independent, unbiased raters. As a result, the researchers concluded that the empirical literature for equine-related interventions for mental illness is limited in scope, as well as compromised by multiple methodological flaws. Kendall et al., 2015 also noted the lack of empirical evidence about the efficacy of equine-related interventions for psychological well-being, and the difficulty of interpretation of results due to a lack of rigorous research designs. After a systematic review of 15 research studies of equine-related interventions for psychological well-being, the researchers concluded that anecdotal and subjective evidence attests that equine-related interventions have positive psychological outcomes, but that well-designed, randomized control studies are necessary to demonstrate the efficacy of equine-related interventions.

During the past few decades, therapeutic riding has continued to increase in popularity as a form of therapy for individuals with physical, emotional, social, behavioral, educational, and cognitive issues (Kendall et al., 2015). Several additional therapeutic riding programs and organizations providing training and certificate programs for equine-related interventions began to form in the United States and around the world (Hallberg, 2018).

Training and Certificate Programs

As equine-related interventions continue to grow in popularity, several training and certificate programs have been established so that practitioners can become certified in various types of programs. These programs, which serve diverse populations, are broad in the terminology, activities, goals, and outcomes for participants in equine-related interventions. The literature for this proposed study depicted the diverse terminology and definitions for this proposed study, which is detailed in Chapter 1. However, only three training and certificate programs were described in the peer-reviewed literature, including the Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy Institute in South Africa (EAPISA), the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA), and the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH Intl).

Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy Institute in South Africa.

The EAPISA is the leading provider of equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP) in South Africa through its membership, which provides its member therapists annual professional development workshops to develop theory and practical knowledge of the use of horses in therapy (Johns, Bobat, & Holder, 2016). Founded in 2007, the EAPISA strives to promote EAP as a profession, provide the highest level of service to professionals in the field of EAP, and promotes the enhancement of human well-being through therapeutic encounters with horses [EAPISA, 2018].

A research study conducted by Johns, Bobat, and Holder (2016) examined the perspectives and experiences of therapists practicing EAP based on the knowledge and professional development gained through the EAPISA. The researchers interviewed 14 practicing EAP therapists, which revealed through thematic analysis their perceived

effectiveness of EAP in providing emotional and interpersonal growth for participants, as well as the training, safety, and ethical concerns of equine-related interventions.

The Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association.

EAGALA is the most well-known training and certificate program that also maintains a membership branch in support of those interested in its model of EAP and equine-assisted learning (EAL) (Hallberg, 2018). In contrast with EAPISA, which only serves South Africa, EAGALA currently has 700 programs located in 45 countries [EAGALA, 2018c]. EAGALA provides a comprehensive certification process, which is offered at several events throughout the year in various countries, as well as a member support network designed to train and empower professionals to become competent, proficient practitioners of the EAGALA model [EAGALA, 2018a].

Certification includes an online pre-training webinar, a five-day EAGALA model workshop, an online post-training assessment, and a professional development portfolio (Hallberg, 2018). The EAGALA model consists of a team approach that includes a licensed mental health professional, a qualified equine specialist, and horses working with participants in an arena [EAGALA, 2018b]. The EAGALA model uses EAP that prescribes a hands-on approach using ground-based activities with horses that does not include horseback riding, requires participants to learn and apply particular life skills (Wilson, Buultjens, Monfries, & Karimi, 2017), and uses self-exploration of thoughts, emotions, and behaviors (McNamara, 2017). Participants also project and analyze their situations and develop their own solutions [EAGALA, 2018b].

Literature for this proposed study included research of participants in equine-related interventions using the EAGALA model. The research studies were not consistent

in the terminology describing the type of equine-related interventions. Wilson, Buultjens, Monfries, and Karimi (2017) and Lee and Makela (2018) conducted research studies based on the EAGALA model and using the terminology *equine assisted psychotherapy*. Wilson, Buultjens, Monfries, and Karimi (2017) conducted an Australian-based qualitative study to examine the perspectives of EAP facilitators and therapists using the EAGALA model on the biopsychosocial benefits and therapeutic outcomes of EAP for adolescents experiencing depression and anxiety. The EAP therapists in the study identified increased confidence, assertiveness, self-esteem, confidence, and emotional regulation in the participants. However, the therapists also noted that there is a lack of knowledge in the wider community about the effectiveness of EAP. The researchers noted that future research should be conducted about the effectiveness of EAP, as well as studying programs using equine-related interventions that are subjected to a regulatory body.

Lee and Makela (2018) examined the perspectives and experiences of EAP practitioners using the EAGALA model in an American-based qualitative research study to explore their use of cognitive activities and strategies, as well as the application of EAP to social work, education, and research. Thematic analysis concluded that cognitive strategies and activities used in EAP based on the EAGALA model should include appropriate settings, provide different levels of structure, and important questions to help participants gain insights and move forward during EAP sessions. Researchers concluded that incorporating EAP into social work, education, and research was a viable and positive application, but that there continues to be a lack of empirical research about EAP practitioners' therapeutic strategies.

A mixed methods pilot study conducted by Whittlesey-Jerome (2014) also used the EAGALA model of EAP for exploring ways to increase self-efficacy among adult female victims of interpersonal violence by adding EAP to conventional treatments. The eight-week study consisted of 13 women between the ages of 28 and 64, who continued to participate in their ongoing therapy programs. The experimental group, consisting of seven participants, also received weekly, two-hour sessions of EAP in conjunction with traditional therapy. The comparison group consisting of six participants did not participate in EAP. All participants completed a pre-test and post-test of *The General Self-Efficacy Scale* (GESS), as well as journals detailing their experiences. Although both the EAP and comparison group improved on depression, anxiety, and general self-efficacy, study results showed greater measures of improvement across all measures for the EAP group. The researcher noted that future research studies should include larger sample sizes to provide more substantial evidence for the efficacy of EAP.

The Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International.

The Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH Intl) has been a pioneer in the field of equine-assisted activities and therapies (EAAT) since the middle of the 20th century [PATH Intl, 2018a]. PATH Intl is known for establishing and maintain the industry standards for equine-related interventions (Hallberg, 2018), which includes business and administration, facility, equine welfare and management, activity, and service standards [PATH Intl, 2018c]. These standards support the mission of PATH Intl, which is to promote safe and optimal outcomes in EAAT for individuals with special needs [PATH Intl, 2018a].

Originally established in 1969 as the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA), PATH Intl changed its name in 2011 to serve non-licensed instructors and educators who teach adaptive horsemanship, riding, and driving lessons, as well as provide support for licensed physical, occupational, speech, and mental health therapists (Hallberg, 2018). Currently, there are more than 880 PATH Intl Member Centers in the United States and around the world [PATH Intl, 2018c]. PATH Intl offers workshops around the world to provides different types of certification, including *Certified Therapeutic Riding Instructor (CTRI)*, *Therapeutic Riding Instructor (TRI)*, *Equine Specialist in Mental Health and Learning (ES)*, *Therapeutic Driving Instructor (D)*, and *Interactive Vaulting Instructor (IV)* [(PATH Intl, 2018b).

Additionally, PATH Intl offers accreditation for centers providing EAAT (Hallberg, 2018). PATH Intl members, instructors, and centers serve participants of all ages with a range of physical, emotional, behavioral, and cognitive challenges by incorporating EAAT into treatment [PATH Intl, 2018a]. Unlike the EAGALA model, which incorporates ground-based activities with horses, PATH Intl incorporates both mounted and unmounted activities in EAAT (Lee, Dakin, & McClure, 2014). In addition to therapeutic riding, EAAT may also include trail riding, hippotherapy, equine-facilitated mental health, equine-facilitated learning, equine-assisted learning, driving, interactive vaulting, competition, or groundwork [PATH Intl, 2018d]. For continued education, PATH Intl offers several workshops and online courses [PATH Intl, 2018b], and members may also attend the association's national conference (Hallberg, 2018).

Similar to Whittlesey-Jerome (2014), Schroeder and Stroud (2015) also conducted a research study to explore the outcomes of equine-related interventions for adult female

victims of interpersonal violence. However, the latter conducted a nine-week qualitative research study to explore the outcomes of equine-facilitated group psychotherapy (EFGP) and followed the standards established by PATH Intl rather than EAGALA. The study consisted of four female survivors of interpersonal violence, ranging in age from mid-twenties to early sixties, participating in EFGP to assist with posttraumatic symptom management, coping skills, and interpersonal difficulties. Equine-related interventions included interactive activities with horses to engage in mindfulness, body awareness, recognition of physiological and emotional responses to stress, and boundaries (Schroeder & Stroud, 2015). The researchers asserted that participants reported being more mindful and aware of themselves in relation to others, as well as feeling more competent and concluded that equine-facilitated group work upheld by the PATH Intl standards is an emerging approach for treatment of trauma and posttraumatic stress. However, future research should conduct longer studies in which the equine-related sessions are also lengthened.

Research studies are available on the incorporation of equine-related interventions for diverse populations and mental health issues. The research studies consist of diverse terminology describing the use and types of equine-related interventions used in therapy. The research methods used in the literature review consist of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed method research studies of equine-related interventions for diverse populations and mental health issues

Research Methods Used in the Reviewed Literature

Researchers taking a quantitative approach typically do so to predict, or determine, the effectiveness of equine assisted activities and therapies. Quantitative

research is also a means to test objective theories through the examination of variables (Creswell, 2009). Data for the existing quantitative research on equine-assisted therapies and activities for diverse populations and mental health issues was collected using experimental design, quasi-experimental design, and pre-test and post-test methods.

Research studies included both survey research and experimental research strategies. Survey research uses numeric descriptions of trends and attitudes whereas experimental research strategies seek to determine if a specific treatment influences an outcome (Creswell, 2009). The survey research in the literature included cross-sectional and longitudinal studies using questionnaires for data collection. These aspects of quantitative research were used as tools to measure the influence and effects of equine-related interventions on diverse mental health issues and populations.

The basic intent of experimental design is to test the impact of a treatment or intervention on an outcome using randomly assigned treatment and control groups (Creswell, 2008). This method of quantitative design was used by researchers to analyze the effects and efficacy of equine-related interventions for treatment of diverse issues and populations. These research studies focused on the outcomes of using equine-related interventions as treatment for social anxiety in young women, as well as self-image, self-control, and trust for at-risk adolescents. Levels of hope and depression in at-risk adolescents also used an experimental design with repeated measures. Another experiment included the analysis of the benefits of equine assisted activities and therapy for children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder.

Quasi-experimental design is used when individuals are not randomly assigned into groups (Creswell, 2009). Researchers use control and experimental groups, but it

involves the analysis of a single individual or small group over time (Creswell, 2009).

Researchers used various formats of quasi-experimental design to measure outcomes of equine-related interventions for posttraumatic stress symptoms in maltreated youth using purposive sampling.

Pre-test and post-test methods are used when a researcher seeks to explore change. Researchers use various instruments to measure specific parameters and data at determined intervals throughout the length of the research study. Several researchers used this method to measure any changes in the variables to determine the impact of using horses in therapy and counseling for diverse populations and issues, including dementia and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder. Formats of this quantitative method included a randomized pretest-posttest crossover design and a prospective, open-label trial.

Qualitative research is concerned with the exploration of meaning (Wilson et al., 2017). The qualitative researcher talks with individuals or groups about their experiences and perceptions (Patton, 2002). Key components of qualitative research design include ethnography, phenomenological research, narrative approach, and thematic analysis, which were used in the existing literature. Strategies for data collection in the literature included interviews and reflective, open-ended journal responses. Also included in the literature are systematic reviews and a narrative synthesis of research studies conducted to analyze and explore the benefits of equine-assisted activities and therapies.

A mixed methods research approach uses both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Mixed methods studies in the literature examined the impact of equine-related interventions on leadership, emotion regulation, aggression, and interpersonal responses to threat for at-risk Guatemalan youth. Focus groups in this mixed method

study also included focus groups. Additionally, the mixed-methods literature also depicted a pilot study examining adult female self-efficacy after participation in equine-related interventions, as well as the psychosocial benefits for veterans participating in equine programs.

A qualitative research design is the best approach for this proposed research study because research providing insight into the perspectives of equine specialists certified through PATH Intl was not available. Quantitative data provides an indication that a particular therapeutic process, such as equine-related counseling, appears to be beneficial, but the insights of participants and therapists through qualitative research adds important insight as to why this type of therapy may or may not be beneficial (Kern-Goal et al., 2016). Additionally, qualitative research provides an in-depth understanding of how people experience and construct meaning using data collection that includes detailed investigations of individuals' perspectives and interpretations, as well as personal interactions (Wilson et al., 2017).

This chapter included a review of the literature depicting research studies on the use of horses in psychology and counseling. The research studies consist of diverse terminology describing the use and types of equine-related interventions used in healing and therapy. The following summary of research methods used in the literature review consists of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed method research studies, as well as systematic reviews of literature and research studies for equine-related interventions.

Quantitative Research

The quantitative research in the literature included experiments, quasi-experiments, and pre-test and post-test methods. Surveys and questionnaires were the

most common form of data collection used by the researchers in the existing literature on equine-assisted activities and therapy. Diverse statistical methods were used to analyze the data, and researchers described similar sample sizes and limitations in the existing quantitative literature.

The researchers used a variety of existing survey instruments and questionnaires due to the diverse populations and issues studied in the existing literature. Alfonso et al. (2015) used the Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale in their experimental design, but the other quantitative research studies included a diverse array of questionnaires and self-report surveys, including the Student's Life Satisfaction Scale, the Children's Interpersonal Trust Scale, the Offer Self-Image Questionnaire (OSIQ), and Rosenbaum's schedule for assessing self-control behaviors (Bachi, Terkel, & Teichman, 2011). Other instrumentation included the Mini Mental State Examination (MMSE) (Dabelko-Schoeny, 2017); the Major Depression Inventory and the Adolescent-Domain Specific Hope Scale (Frederick, Hatz, & Lanning, 2015); and the Pediatric Quality of Life Generic Core Scales (PedsQL) and the Child Health Questionnaire (CHQ) (Jang et al., 2015) were used in the quantitative research literature to measure the effects, outcomes, and efficacy of using equine-related interventions for diverse populations and mental health issues.

Researchers also used both random and purposive assignment, and diverse instrumentation to measure the effects and outcomes of equine-related interventions for diverse populations and mental health issues. While some researchers used random assignment in their experimental designs (Alfonso et al., 2015; Bachi, Terkel, & Teichman, 2011; DaBelko-Schoeny et al., 2017; Frederick, Hatz, & Lanning, 2015), one researcher used purposive sampling strategy (Jang et al., 2015).

Descriptive statistics, such as overall percentages for categorical variables, frequency distributions, the mean, and standard deviations for continuous variables to present the results of the surveys and questionnaires were used by the researchers. This information included demographics and characteristics about the participants, as well as the horses used in the research studies.

Researchers also used *t-tests* to examine the effects of the intervention between the baseline and immediate post-data (Alfonso et al., 2015; Frederick, Hatz, & Lanning, 2015), as well as a random effects linear regression model to measure the interactions between the treatment and control groups (DaBelko-Schoeny, 2017). The results of the *t-tests* provided researchers with data depicting that experimental groups exposed to the treatment demonstrated improvements in social anxiety (Alfonso et al., 2015); dementia (Frederick, Hatz, & Lanning, 2015) and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (Jang et al., 2015).

Quasi-experiments and pre-test and post-test designs were also employed by quantitative researchers. Researchers analyzing the effects of equine-related interventions for posttraumatic stress disorder not only used an instrument to measure mental health, the Children's Revised Inventory of Events Scale (CRIES-13), but also used the Human Animals Bond Scale to reflect basic tenets of the human-animal bond (McCullough, Risley-Curtiss, & Rorke, 2015). The results of each test were analyzed using a pre-test and post-test design. The pre-test and post-test method consistently demonstrated the positive effects and outcomes of equine-related interventions.

The sample sizes in the quantitative literature ranged from eight to twenty-six participants. Sample size was noted throughout the research studies to be a limitation in

the research, as well as something to be improved upon in future research. Researchers also noted the length of the research studies was a limitation.

Qualitative Research

Other research studies focused on the goals of equine-assisted activities and therapies through a qualitative lens. Ethnography, phenomenology, and narrative approaches were used in the literature. Researchers typically used interviews, focus groups, and systematic analyses as qualitative approach strategies. Thematic analysis was used to determine the themes and meanings emerging from the research.

Ethnography is a flexible research process in which researchers study intact cultural groups over a prolonged period of time by collecting observational and interview data (Creswell, 2009). As a result, ethnography provides a unique and personalized cultural account from the point of view of those who live rather than simply experience certain phenomena as a temporary occurrence. Billany (2012) used ethnographic methodology and employed a narrative method to gain insight into the psychosocial benefits of using horses in therapy by gathering stories from nine women in focus groups.

Another concept utilized in qualitative research studies is phenomenological research, which is a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher “identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants” (Creswell, 2009, p. 13). In addition to the enrichment of qualitative analysis, phenomenological research also seeks to discover the meaning and significance of certain phenomena rather than simply viewing these occurrences as objective mechanisms of one’s natural world (Ashworth, 2015). Wilson et al. (2015) used phenomenology to explore therapists’ perspectives on using equine-related interventions to adolescents diagnosed with depression and anxiety.

The researchers used a phenomenological approach to create knowledge and understanding of the lived experiences on individuals in regard to equine-related interventions.

Lee and Makela (2018) also aimed to make sense of experiences and the construction of meaning. However, the researchers chose a constructivist narrative approach to gather a deep understanding of experienced therapists' cognitive strategies and activities used in the practicing equine assisted activities and therapy.

Thematic analysis was used to describe the themes, ideas, and meanings emerging from the research studies (Johns, Bobat, & Holder, 2016; Lee & Makela, 2018); McNamara, 2017). Thematic analysis notes relationships, similarities, and differences in the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Common themes emerging from the literature include the experiences and benefits of equine-related interventions; motivating factors for practicing equine-related interventions; and challenges identified by equine counseling practitioners (Johns, Bobat, & Holder, 2016). Appropriate settings, different levels of challenges, and meeting the needs of clients were themes identified by Lee and Makela (2018). The practice of equine-related interventions, mechanisms of change, and the selection and implementation of activities were also common themes described by therapists (McNamara, 2017).

The most common method of inquiry used by researchers in the qualitative literature were semistructured interviews. Interviews are at the center of many qualitative research studies since they provide deep and individualized data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The interviews were conducted face-to face (Lee & Makela; McNamara, 2017; Wilson et al., 2017). Johns, Bobat, & Holder used email-facilitated interviews.

Mixed Methods Research

The literature also depicted several mixed methods studies for equine-related interventions for diverse populations and mental health issues, which included a variety of goals, activities, and outcomes. Mixed methods research studies involve the use of both quantitative and qualitative approaches in tandem (Creswell, 2009).

Gibbons et al. (2017) utilized a wait-control design in which participants were assigned to the experimental group or the wait-list control group, who received the equine-related interventions workshop two weeks after the experimental group. The mixed methods approach in this research study resulted in quantitative and qualitative data from three sources. Both types of data were collected from workshop participants. Quantitative data were collected from mentors, and qualitative data were collected from the participants' relatives.

Quantitative measures included several self-report questionnaires, including Youth Leadership Life Skills Development (YLLSD), Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory (TRIM), the Normative Beliefs about Aggression Scale (NBAS), the Emotion Regulation Scale (ERQ), and the Cognitive-Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (CERQ). Additionally, mentors of the participants completed the Child Behavior Checklist (CBS) and a demographic questionnaire. The researchers used ANCOVAS to compare the experimental and wait-list control groups, followed by *t*-tests. The results depicted improvements in leadership for the experimental group. The mentors' reports indicated that the experimental group scored lower on aggression than the wait-list control group.

The qualitative methods in the research study included participant focus groups, focus groups with family, and coding. Participants in the focus group were asked to describe what they had learned from participation in the equine workshop and how they have applied that knowledge to their lives. The common themes that emerged from the focus groups included Empowerment, Emotion Regulation, and Positive Emotion.

In the family focus groups, participants were asked to describe any changes in how the participant was behaving with family, friends, and classmates. The themes that emerged included Emotion Regulation, Better Interpersonal Interactions, Empowered Leaders, and Learning from Horses.

A mixed methods pilot study of a two-day psychosocial equine program for veterans (Ferruolo, 2015) also revealed positive outcomes. The convenience sample included veterans who were being treated from depression, anxiety disorders, and reintegration issues. Participants completed self-report evaluation data, which were analyzed using chi-square data analyses. Qualitative data analysis identified four themes from open-ended reflection questions completed by the participants. The themes included Learning about Self, Spiritual Connections, Trust, and Respect.

The results of the study depicted that equine-related interventions assist with anxiety and depression, as well as improves psychological well-being (Ferruolo, 2015). Elevated self-esteem and trust were also demonstrated in the findings.

Whittlesey-Jerome (2014) also conducted a mixed-methods exploratory pilot study on the benefits of equine-related interventions. The research study aimed to explore ways that equine-related interventions helped to increase adult female self-efficacy among victims of interpersonal violence. For eight-weeks, participants in the

experimental group received weekly, two-hour sessions of equine-related interventions whereas the control group received regular group therapy. Quantitative measures used in the study include Beck's Depression Inventory, the General Self-Efficacy Scale, Burns' Anxiety Scale, and the Global Assessment of Functioning Scale. Results analyzed in SPSS used ANOVAS and pre-test and post-test methods to demonstrate that the experimental group showed greater improvement in self-efficacy, depression, and general functioning in comparison to the control group.

The qualitative aspects of this research study used phenomenology to identify themes from the participants' reflective journals. A number of themes emerged in the analysis of the phenomenological data provided by the journals, including comfort in the moment, perception, boundaries, assertiveness, letting go, just being, and power (Whittlesey-Jerome, 2014).

Similar to the quantitative and qualitative data, researchers using mixed method approaches also asserted that limitations in the research included a small sample size (Ferruolo, 2015; Gibbons, 2017; Whittlesey-Jerome, 2014). Future research studies should include larger sample sizes and diverse populations and groups.

The existing literature primarily used EAGALA as the model for equine-related interventions in the research studies. Although PATH Intl. cites some research studies supporting the benefits of equine-related interventions on its website, the research is not conclusive enough to substantiate these claims (Hallberg, 2018).

Although the existing literature demonstrates a good deal of research, our understanding of equine-related interventions and its uses is still in its infancy (Hallberg, 2018). Equine-assisted activities and therapy are provided by thousands of professionals

from around the world, and it is hoped that these professionals will continue to practice with as much information and knowledge as possible (Hallberg, 2018).

Anecdotal Literature

Systematic reviews were also included in the qualitative literature for this research study. Equine-related interventions for diverse populations and mental disorders are becoming increasingly popular, but they have been subjected to limited systematic investigation (Anestis, Anestis, Zawilinski, Hopkins, & Lilienfeld, 2014). Anestis et al. (2014) conducted a systematic review of fourteen peer-reviewed studies examining treatments of mental health disorders using equine-related interventions. Likewise, Kendall et al. (2017) also conducted a systematic review of the efficacy of equine-assisted interventions on psychological outcomes using fifteen peer-reviewed studies. Lee, Dakin, & McClure (2016) completed a narrative synthesis on equine-assisted psychotherapy literature to review current knowledge and future research directions. The researchers concluded that although equine-related interventions have grown in popularity, the research is still in its infancy (Lee, Dakin, McClure, 2016), and there is limited empirical evidence that it offers benefits to individuals with mental health disorders or other psychological difficulties (Anestis et al., 2014). The researchers also ascertained that future research studies use random assignment and proper control conditions, psychometrically strong measures, and follow-up data (Anestis et al., 2014; Kendall et al., 2017).

Summary and Conclusions

“Although science cannot yet tell us exactly how horses help humans, a rich history assures us there is a reason why horses have been included in healthcare for

centuries” (Hallberg, 2018, p. 22). These research studies depict the diverse applications of using horses in therapy with various groups of people, mental health issues, and multicultural groups. The research studies citing a model for equine-related interventions have focused primarily on the EAGALA approach for equine-related interventions, and few studies explored the perspectives and experiences of therapists using equine-related interventions. Therefore, this research study will focus on the perspectives and experiences of certified equine specialists and the goals, activities, and outcomes for diverse populations and mental health issues as depicted by the models and mission statement of PATH Intl. PATH Intl is known for establishing and maintaining the industry standards for equine-related interventions (Hallberg, 2018), and its goals and outcomes consist of both unmounted and mounted activities with horses (Lee, Dakin, & McClure, 2014). Additionally, PATH Intl offers different levels of certification, which allows for diverse perspectives and experiences in the use of equine-related interventions. Finally, PATH Intl is a global authority, resource, and advocate for equine-related interventions to inspire and enrich the human spirit [PATH Intl, 2018a].

Involvement of animals in the therapeutic process was absent from professional literature until the 1960s (Bachi, Terkel, & Teichman, 2011). Although equine-assisted activities and therapy have experienced a surge in popularity and research, there is a notable gap between the outcomes of scholarly research and the personal beliefs, opinions, and practice patterns prevalent in accessible literature (Hallberg, 2018). There is a need for research that depicts the therapists’ perspectives and experiences using equine-related interventions, which includes the goals, activities, and outcomes used in conjunction with the mission and standards set forth by PATH Intl.

Although the researchers throughout the literature review consistently noted the popularity and growth of equine-related interventions, they also continually called for further empirical research consisting of larger sample sizes of participants to demonstrate the efficacy and effectiveness of equine-related interventions. However, not one of the research studies or suggestions for future research considered the question, “Why horses?” For equine-related interventions to be experiencing a surge in popularity, the therapists engaging in this therapeutic modality must believe in what they are doing to help to improve mental health and psychological outcomes. It is time to gain insight into the perspectives and experiences of therapists using equine-related interventions based on the diverse goals, activities, and outcomes of PATH Intl.

This review has examined the history of using horses in healing and therapy, training and certification programs for equine interventions, and the literature depicting previously conducted studies of equine interventions. Chapter 3 consists of the research design and rationale, the researcher’s role, the method employed by the sample selection, the data collection and analysis plan, and ethical considerations.

Chapter 3: Research Methods

Introduction

Limited research studies have been conducted to explore therapists' perspectives on the use of equine-assisted activities and therapies. Less existing research is available about the perspectives of equine specialists certified through PATH Intl. As a result, there was a gap in the literature that could potentially be fulfilled through this research study. This phenomenological research study focused on equine specialists certified through PATH Intl and explored the experiences of the therapists in setting goals, planning activities, and evaluating outcomes of equine-assisted activities and therapy. The approach was of a qualitative nature and consisted of in-depth interviews with equine specialists certified through PATH Intl.

This chapter includes a full explanation of the research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, methodology, instrumentation, procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection, as well as the data analysis plan. Issues with trustworthiness and ethical procedures are also contained in this chapter.

Research Design and Rationale

Research Question

The first research question in this research study was, "What are the experiences of equine specialists certified through the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH Intl) in providing equine assisted therapy and activities to their clients?" The second research question was, "What were the contributing factors in choosing PATH Intl for certification in equine assisted activities and therapies."

I designed the research questions for the qualitative exploration of the experiences of therapists who are certified equine specialists and counselors through PATH Intl in setting goals, planning activities, and evaluating outcomes of equine-assisted activities and therapy. A qualitative lens was appropriate for this research study for several reasons. Qualitative research is used to discover and describe the ways that people view, approach, and experience the world and make meaning of their experiences, as well as specific phenomena (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Qualitative methods facilitate the study of a phenomenon in depth and with detail and openness (Patton, 2002). Furthermore, qualitative inquiry identifies what particular people do in their everyday lives and what their actions mean to them (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Rationale

For this research study, I used a phenomenological approach to explore the perspectives of PATH Intl certified equine specialists to gain further understanding and meaning of the use of equine-assisted activities and therapies in psychology and counseling. Phenomenology arose as a philosophy in Germany prior to World War I and continues to occupy a prominent position in modern philosophy (Dowling, 2007). Although Immanuel Kant used the term in his philosophy texts in the 18th century, it was Franz Brentano who employed the phrase of *descriptive* phenomenology, which inspired the work of Edmund Husserl (Dowling, 2007).

Additionally, phenomenology is considered both a research method, as well as a philosophy, which was largely influenced by the work of Edmund Husserl (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Phenomenological research methods are mainly concerned with the descriptions of lived experiences by the experiencer, as this method opens up dimensions

that would otherwise be inaccessible (Giorgi, 1997). I selected phenomenology as the most appropriate strategy of inquiry for this research study, as I sought to explore, understand, and attribute meaning to the use of equine-assisted activities and therapies, as described by PATH Intl certified equine specialists. A phenomenological approach provided deep and rich descriptions of the goals, activities, and outcomes used in equine assisted activities and therapy for mental health and wellness. Furthermore, phenomenology provided the opportunity for therapists and equine specialists to ascribe meaning to their choice of PATH Intl for certification. Likewise, phenomenology also helped to decrease my own personal bias in the role of the researcher and helped me to suspended personal experiences, biases, and assumptions in the research study.

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research, the role of the researcher is of a participatory nature, as the researcher gains access into the participants' natural environment (Clark & Veale, 2018). Additionally, the researcher is the main instrument to collect and analyze data (Clarke & Veale, 2018). For this research study, I selected the participants and conducted the interviews, as well as collected, analyzed, and coded the data. It was also my responsibility to transcribe the interviews. In order to assist with trustworthiness and quality, I enlisted the assistance of Walden university professors to provide quality checks during analysis.

For the research process, I conducted interviews in which participants were able to speak freely in order to provide genuine insight and information about their experiences using equine interventions. Participants described the use of horses in equine-related interventions for mental health and wellness for diverse populations.

Because I own horses, there are some potential biases related to the research study that must be disclosed. In addition to positive interactions with my horses, I have also had several positive experiences and interactions at various horse-related events and activities. I also have several friends and acquaintances who work in the field of equine-related interventions. Additionally, I am a member of the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship.

Methodology

I used a phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of PATH Intl certified equine specialists. Phenomenology is a qualitative research method originally developed by philosopher Edmund Husserl, who formulated that scientific methods are designed to assist psychological researchers in the investigation of human behavior and experience (Wertz, 2005). Husserl developed a procedure called *intentional analysis*, which provides knowledge of human situations, their processes, and meanings (Wertz, 2005). This procedure expands phenomenology as a conceptual practice of science to include descriptive studies of the human attitude that emphasizes rich, detailed descriptions of life as it is concretely lived (Wertz, 2005). These aspects of phenomenology were essential to this research study in the exploration of the experiences of therapists using equine-related interventions for psychology and counseling. The information I gathered in this research study described the goals, activities, and outcomes of equine-assisted activities and therapies used by PATH Intl certified equine specialists, as well as why they chose to be a part of equine-assisted activities and therapy.

Wertz (2005) described data collected through phenomenological research as reflective of the details of lived situations and experiences rather than hypotheses,

interpretations, or generalizations about phenomena. The phenomenological approach allowed for in-depth interviews that explored the perspectives and experiences of equine therapists in conjunction with their choice of following the model established by PATH Intl. Phenomenology allowed for this data to be collected with fewer cases because the therapists are all certified through PATH Intl and hold similar beliefs and values, as well as goals and activities, for equine-related interventions.

The use of a phenomenological approach does not require a large sample size. Therefore, I used semistructured, open-ended telephone interviews to explore the use of horses for mental health and wellness. I interviewed eight participants certified through PATH Intl to explore the goals and activities used in equine-assisted activities and therapy.

Participant Selection Logic

Phenomenological analysis involves the participation of individuals who have a relationship with the subject matter under investigation (Wertz, 2005). Participants for this qualitative research study were selected using purposive sampling. Purposive sampling applies to strategically selected participants in order to gather useful manifestations of the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2002). The participants for this study were equine specialists certified through PATH Intl. I recruited participants were recruited through posts on several equine-related Facebook group pages. The first group in which I posted for recruitment was the Path Intl Equine Managers. I also posted recruitment in Equine Assisted Learning, the Equine Assisted and Facilitated Practitioners Network (EAFPN), and the Equine Facilitated Mental Health Association (EFMHA). These groups consist of national and international members. Participant

selection consisted of eight PATH-certified equine specialists until data saturation occurred in the data collection. When data saturation occurs, enough data has been gathered to support the research question. Research was thorough and balanced, and included a range of perspectives and alternative points of view with no major gaps in information, as suggested by Rubin and Rubin (2012).

Instrumentation

I gathered information through recorded, semistructured telephone interviews. Interviews consisted of a series of semistructured questions pertaining to the goals, activities, and outcomes utilized in PATH-oriented equine interventions. As suggested by Turner (2010), I asked participants semistructured questions with an open-ended format to allow the contribution of detailed information, as well as to allow the researcher to ask probing follow-up questions.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

I used phenomenological research to identify the experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants and captures another's experience in his or her own words (Patton, 2002). In the search for meaning and understanding of a particular phenomenon, the sample size must be reflective of deep, intimate reflections of lived experiences to provide an effective and meaningful understanding. These concepts of phenomenology are also essential to the data collection process, as well as data analysis. Phenomenology is a holistic approach that requires the reading of all data collection prior to beginning analysis (Giorgi, 1997). Therefore, a small sample size of therapists and equine specialists provided a richer content and key themes required to answer the research questions effectively.

For this research study, the sample size consisted of eight participants who were able to provide a full and rich description of the phenomenon of equine-related interventions for mental health and wellness, as well as the meaning explaining the choice of PATH Intl for certification. The interviews for this study continued until the achievement of data saturation.

I selected the sample for this research study from social media groups consisting of members that are affiliated with and certified through PATH Intl. PATH Intl is a national and international organization that currently has more than 4,800 certified instructors and equine specialists in mental health and learning in several disciplines, as well as 877 member centers providing equine-assisted activities and therapy services according to the mission statement and standards upheld by the organization [PATH Intl, 2019]. The sample for this study consisted of diverse approaches, activities, and multicultural ideas regarding the meaning of using horses for mental health and wellness. In the following section, I will outline the strategies that were used to recruit participants and the criteria used in their selection.

Recruitment and Participation of Participants

The first step in seeking the recruitment and participation of participants was structured through online social media websites and applications. I provided a post seeking recruitment via the researcher's personal accounts on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. The post briefly outlined the research study and the criteria required for potential participants, as well as an email address created specifically for this proposed research study.

I conducted the second step in seeking recruitment for potential participants through posts on several equine-related Facebook group pages, consisting of national and international members, of which the researcher is a member. As previously noted, the initial recruitment posts were posted in the PATH Intl Equine Managers group. Recruitment was also be posted in several other groups, including Equine Assisted Learning, EAFPN, and EFMHA.

The third step in the recruitment process was to respond to the emails from potential participants. I responded by thanking the participants for their interest and provided a more in-depth description of the research study and its purpose, as well as the informed consent form. I instructed participants to respond to the email with consent to participate in the research study. As previously noted, participant selection consisted of eight PATH-certified equine specialists, which continued until the occurrence of data saturation. Recruitment for participant selection continued through various social media applications until the required numbers of participants were secured for data collection.

The fourth step in the recruitment process was to organize and review the applicants for participant selection. I selected participants, who were certified through PATH Intl, but not other equine credentialing agencies. I responded to the selected participants via email to setup appropriate times for recorded, semistructured telephone interviews. There are several advantages to including technology-mediated interviews in research, including potential access to a greater number of geographical participants, less inconvenience to participants, lower costs, and greater accessibility (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I recorded the interviews on a recording device on my computer, and I transcribed

the interviews with handwritten notes. I managed data and transcription using password protected programs and a locked file cabinet for written notes and documents.

I commenced participant recruitment upon gaining the approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) on June 7, 2019. The approval number from the IRB was 06-05-19-0345413. I added the approval number to the consent form provided to participants interested in the research study.

Data Collection

The data collection process consisted of recorded, semistructured telephone interviews. The estimated duration of each interview was approximately 60 to 90 minutes and were dependent upon the amount of information and level of detail provided by the participant. The goal of each interview was to obtain as much information as possible regarding the therapists' experiences using equine-related interventions for mental health and wellness, including goals, activities, and outcomes. The interviews provided deep, rich contextual insight into the participants' lived experiences and the construction of meaning regarding a particular phenomenon (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In order to maintain privacy and a quiet atmosphere, I contacted each participant from the privacy of the home office at the mutually agreed upon time discussed in the response email after participant selection. I used the participant's preferred method of contact, which was a telephone interview.

After initial greetings and introductions, the researcher once again reviewed the purpose and goals of the research study, as well as the content of the signed informed consent form. The researcher also stressed that participation in the research study was voluntary and could be terminated at any time without explanation. Additionally, I

cautioned the participants about revealing any information that may personally identify their clients in their equine-related therapy and counseling programs. I also informed participants that their names would not be used in the research study and that pseudonyms would be used in the data collection and analysis. All information was stored in a password protected program on the researcher's computer, as well as on password protected external drives. I also reiterated to participants that the interviews would be recorded using the recording program on the researcher's computer.

I used an interview guide to ensure that each participant has the opportunity to provide a rich, detailed description of experiences using equine-related interventions for mental health and wellness. The interview guide consisted of interview questions, as well as corresponding questions used to probe for additional data regarding the specific topic. Before ending the interview, I asked the participants if they feel their description of their experiences using equine-related interventions is complete, as well as if they had any additional information that they would like to add.

At the conclusion of each interview, I expressed gratitude and thanks to the participant. I thanked them for their time, information, and insight. I also requested permission from each participant for future contact should the need arise.

I concluded the data collection process with the recorded contents of the interviews being saved into files for each participant under their pseudonym, which was password protected and only available to the researcher. I manually organized and transcribed the data from the interviews and audio recordings. Data will be stored for five years. After the required storage period of data, paper documents will be shredded and recycled, and data stored on hard drives will be erased using commercial software

applications. The steps that were used to analyze the data are described in the next section.

Data Analysis Plan

I analyzed the data for this research study through a phenomenological approach, thematic analysis, and the use of a priori and emergent coding. The elements of data analysis are consistent with phenomenology and the constructivist approach due to the nature of the interview questions, which addressed the therapists' personal experiences using equine-assisted activities and therapy. The participants described their personal experiences using activities involved in equine-related interventions, their feelings and ideas about interacting with horses, as well as how these subjective experiences construct meaning in personal lives and relationships.

Giorgi (1997) asserted that phenomenological research should be of a descriptive nature and include the participants' descriptions rather than the researcher's stance (Phillips-Pula et al., 2011). Data analysis included several readings of the researchers' notes of the participants' descriptions of the phenomenon and the division of the descriptions into meaningful units by identifying significant terms. (Phillips-Pula et al., 2011). Data analysis also describes the meaning of each unit; the relationship to the topic of study; and development of a description of the experiences (Phillips-Pula et al., 2011).

Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes or patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes capture important information about the data in relation to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was conducted using the six-step approach developed by Braun and Clarke. The initial stage of thematic analysis includes the development of a set of a priori codes

(Braun & Clarke, 2006). After reading the data several times, I created a set of emergent codes, which evolved from reading and analyzing the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Next, I defined and name key themes and subthemes, which included detailed analyses (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

I coded the data analysis manually so that I could gain a stronger sense of the data for thematic analysis. I completed this task of data analysis using handwritten notes from the interview, as well as analyses of the interviews obtained from the saved recordings. After the completion of manual coding, I locked the data analysis paperwork in a filing cabinet in my home office, and the typed documents were saved in password-protected programs on my laptop.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Credibility is defined as the confidence that can be placed in the truth of the research findings (Anney, 2014). The credibility of qualitative research inquiry depends on the methods used, aspects of the researcher, and the philosophical belief in the value of qualitative inquiry (Patton, 2002). Methods used in obtaining qualitative research should be rigorous in order to yield systematically, high-quality data that is analyzed with particular attention to issues of credibility, such as the biases and predispositions of the research (Patton, 2002). It is essential that in order not to compromise credibility that the researcher disclose any predispositions, biases, or affiliations related to the research study. Researchers should aim to establish credibility by implementing several strategies of validity, including presenting detailed descriptions, member checking, and using peer debriefing Since I have owned horses for many years, as well as a non-certified member

of PATH Intl and the groups previously described for participant recruitment, assistance for the elimination of any biases was sought by asking the Dissertation Chairperson to review coded units and themes so that credibility were not compromised.

Transferability

Transferability is the degree to which the results of the research study can be generalizable or transferred to additional contexts with other respondents (Anney, 2014). The research question is centered on the experiences of PATH Intl certified equine specialists using equine-related interventions for diverse populations and mental health issues. Although I focused this research study on the experiences in connection with the use of guidelines established by the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship, it is transferrable to therapists certified through other credentialing bodies in equine-related interventions.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the stability of findings over time, as well as if the data received from participants supports the interpretations and recommendations (Anney, 2014). Researchers can gain dependability by having a reasoned argument of how data were collected, and that the results are consistent with the research questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The dependability of the research study was achieved through the development of a solid research design for data collection and analysis, including aligned interview questions, handwritten field notes transcribed during the interview, saved recordings of each interview session, and the manual transcription of the data.

Confirmability

Anney (2014) describes confirmability as the degree to which the results of an inquiry could be confirmed by other researchers. The research can be confirmed by other researchers as demonstrated by previous research studies exploring the experiences of certified equine therapists following the model established by EAGALA. Additionally, one goal of confirmability in qualitative research is to acknowledge and explore the ways in which biases can relate to the interpretations of data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Therefore, I continually sought feedback from the Dissertation Chair throughout this research study.

Ethical Procedures

The research study was conducted under the parameters of the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) upon receiving approval and permission. The study consisted of interviews with equine specialists certified through PATH Intl. Steps were taken to ensure the interviewers' privacy and confidentiality, as well as their clients participating in equine-related interventions. Data collection was securely maintained and only able to be accessed by me.

Summary

The purpose of this research study was to explore the experiences of PATH certified equine specialists in setting goals, planning activities, and evaluating outcomes of equine-assisted activities and therapy. I used a phenomenological approach in this research study and included semistructured interviews to create an understanding of the experiences of certified therapists using equine-related interventions.

I provided a description of the research method, the role of the researcher, methodology, and data collection and analysis in this chapter. I also described the procedures for participant recruitment and selection for this research study. I will provide the findings of this phenomenological research study in chapter 4. I will present information about the interviews, participants, data collection, data management, and data analysis in detail.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

I conducted this phenomenological study to explore the experiences of practitioners certified in equine-assisted activities and therapy through PATH Intl. In addition to describing the experiences, goals, activities, and outcomes of using EAAT for mental health and wellness, I also designed this study to explore the contributing factors in the selection of PATH Intl for certification in EAAT. This study also included the attitudes, opinions, and beliefs about the positive effects and outcomes of incorporating horses into psychology and counseling for mental health and wellness.

A constructivist framework guided this research study to explore how equine specialists construct the meanings and realities of their experiences using equine-related interventions in psychology and counseling by answering the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the experiences of PATH certified equine specialists in providing equine assisted therapy and activities to their clients?

RQ2: What were the contributing factors in choosing PATH for certification in providing equine assisted therapy and activities?

The information gained from this study could promote the knowledge and education of using horses in psychology and counseling for mental health and wellness by providing an alternative to traditional talk therapy. Additionally, this research study could promote further awareness, as well as an understanding, of the goals of PATH Intl, as well as available training and certification programs.

This chapter will include information about the interviews, participant demographics, data collection, data analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, and data analysis results.

Interviews

I used semistructured telephone interviews using a phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of equine-assisted activities and therapy as described by specialists certified through PATH Intl. I conducted each of the semistructured telephone interviews in my home office on the date and time as chosen by the participant. The interviews were audio-recorded using the QuickTime program on my laptop. The QuickTime program was able to audio-record the telephone interviews, which was on speakerphone, and to be saved to a private, password protected folder on my laptop. I could then easily access the QuickTime recordings for transcription.

Prior to each interview, each participant received a letter of thanks for their interest, as well as a more detailed description of the research study. I also informed participants about the contents of the informed consent form, which described confidentiality, the nature of the study, the ability to discontinue participation in the study at any time with explanation, and that the interview would be audio-recorded. The informed consent form was also attached to the email with the letter of thanks. Each participant that took part in the research study responded to the email with the words, "I consent." I was not made aware of any personal or organizational conditions that may have influenced any of the participants or their interview experience. None of the participants discontinued any of their interviews.

Participant Information

To qualify for this research study, each participant had to have an equine-related certification from PATH Intl. and had to be actively engaged in equine-assisted activities and therapy. Three of the participants were certified through PATH Intl as Therapeutic Riding Instructors (TRI). One participant was certified through PATH Intl as an Equine Specialist for Mental Health and Learning. Three participants in the research study were certified as Therapeutic Riding Instructors and Equine Specialists for Mental Health and Learning through PATH Intl. I organized the participants in data collection by the order of their interviews. The first participant was described as “Pt1,” and the additional participants were numbered in consecutive numerical order to distinguish the participants’ and their responses. Each participant has one or more equine-related certification through PATH Intl. Participant Information is also depicted in the table below.

Table 1

Participant Information

| Type of Certification | Participants |
|-----------------------|-----------------|
| TRI | Pt2 Pt4 Pt5 |
| ESMHL | Pt6 |
| TRI/ESMHL | Pt1 Pt3 Pt7 Pt8 |

Data Collection and Management

This research study included eight participants. In order to recruit participants, a social media post was generated in several horse-related social media groups, as well as the researcher’s personal social media accounts. The horse-related groups in which the social media post was presented are the Equine Facilitated Mental Health Association

(EFMHA); Equine Assisted Activities and Therapy; Equine-Assisted and Facilitated Practitioners Network, PATH Intl Region 2; PATH Intl Region 3; Equine Assisted Learning; PATH Intl Equine Managers; and Human Horse Bond. Additionally, the researcher presented the social media post on personal social media accounts, including Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. The social media post guided interested participants to email the researcher in order to gain a further understanding of the study, as well as to review the informed consent form.

In response to the social media post, I received a total of 17 responses from participants interested in the study. Each of the interested participants received a response email from the researcher that included a letter of thanks, as well as a more detailed description of the research study and its purpose. The response email also included information about the attached informed consent form and how to provide consent to participate in the study to the researcher.

After contacting the 17 potential participants with the response letter and consent form, I received a total of 11 responses from participants stating, "I consent." One participant was not able to participate in the study because her certification was issued by another horse-related group and not PATH Intl.

Upon receiving consent, I emailed each of the 11 consenting participants, who were certified through PATH Intl, to arrange a convenient date and time to conduct the interview. Nine participants responded with interview dates and times. One participant who scheduled an interview was unable to participate at the scheduled time due to an issue with her horse and asked for a rescheduled date and time, but she did not respond to neither a subsequent email nor text message. One participant provided consent but never

responded with an interview date and time. Five of the interested participants did not provide consent. As a result, eight participants certified through PATH Intl consented to participated in the research study and were interviewed by me.

Data management for this research study included the privacy of a home office, and the use of a password protected laptop and data files. All handwritten data and notes were stored in a folder in a locked storage box only accessible to the researcher. Interviews were audio-recorded through the QuickTime program on my laptop and saved according to the participants' initials. All audio-recordings were saved in a password protected file. All data pertaining to this research study will be terminated and destroyed by me after the required storage period of 5 years. I will shred and recycle all paper documents, and I will use commercial software applications to erase data stored on hard drives.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the data for this research study using a phenomenological approach, thematic analysis, and the use of a priori and emergent coding. This phenomenological research study was of a descriptive nature and included the participants' descriptions rather than the researcher's stance (Phillips-Pula et al., 2011). Data analysis included several readings of my notes of the participants' descriptions of the phenomenon and the division of the descriptions into meaningful units by identifying significant terms as described by Phillips-Pula et al., (2011). I manually transcribed the data through notes recorded during the interview, as well as through several reviews of the audio-recordings from QuickTime.

I coded the data analysis manually so that I could gain a stronger sense of the data for thematic analysis. I completed this task of data analysis using handwritten notes from the interview, as well as analyses of the interviews obtained from the saved audio recordings using the QuickTime program on my laptop. During each audio-recorded interview, I recorded notes on a printed copy on the interview questions. After completing each interview, the researcher listened to each recording to make additional notations and to check previous notes for accuracy. After the completion of manual coding, I had initially planned to use the data analysis software NVivo to manage the descriptions and to organize the data. However, I tables in Microsoft Word to complete these tasks. Upon organizing the data into several tables, I was able to synthesize the themes with direct quotes and information gathered from the interviews with participants, as well as to become more connected with the meanings and themes of equine-assisted activities generated in the transcriptions and data analyses.

I conducted thematic analysis using the six-step approach developed by Braun and Clarke to identify, analyze, and reporting themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After reading the data several times, I created a set of emergent codes, which evolved from reading and analyzing the data, and named and defined key themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I organized the themes emerging from the data into a table, which included key phrases and ideas generated by the participants. I also organized data and themes by interview questions.

During thematic analysis, similar experiences, ideas, and beliefs about equine-assisted activities and therapy were expressed by multiple participants. Common themes emphasized by participants included communication, confidence, awareness, and the

power of the herd. Participants also described several ways in which the activities used in equine therapy and learning are applicable to daily life skills and relationships. Building partnerships, trust, and mutual respect were noted as applicable skills learned while working with the horses. When describing the credentialing factors for choosing PATH Intl for certification, participants cited the credibility and standards supported by the PATH Intl goals and mission statement.

Participants also described personal reflections in using equine-related interventions for mental health and wellness. Pt8 stated, “I am fortunate every day,” and Pt3 emphasized, “This is the most wonderful thing I have ever done!” Several participants noted the power of horses as teachers, as well as how their own learning continues daily. Connections were also an important theme, as Pt4 noted, “I have met so many amazing people because of horses!” A further description of these themes and others is provided in the results section later in this chapter.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Evidence of trustworthiness includes confirmability, credibility, transferability, and dependability to establish trustworthiness. For this research study, I used several strategies during data collection and analysis to ensure that the data demonstrated evidence of trustworthiness. Strategies included audio-recordings, note-taking, checking for accuracy, and security.

For this research study, confirmability was established by audio-recording each interview, reviewing the data collection, and quality evaluations by the dissertation chairperson. During the interviews, participants were asked to clarify or further describe horse-related activities. Interviews also continued until data saturation was achieved.

Another measure I used to ensure credibility was note-taking used throughout the interviews and data analysis process. During the interviews, I notated key feelings, thoughts, emotions, and insights described by participants on a printed copy of the interview questions. Additionally, I reviewed the audio-recordings of each interview for accuracy of the notes. During data analysis, I used key words, phrases, and quotes were used to create a priori coding and emergent themes. I provide a further discussion of these themes and ideas are described in Chapter 5.

I achieved transferability by having participants describe the role of the horses in psychology and counseling, as well as the activities used in equine-related interventions for mental health and wellness. Participants also provided nondescriptive insight into the individuals, groups, and populations served in their equine-assisted activities and therapy programs. This information aligns with transferability because the same information can be collected in research studies including other certifying organizations for equine-assisted activities and interventions. The study can be replicated by including participants certified through organizations other than PATH Intl for future research.

I provided dependability for this research study by documenting the research and data collections processes, maintaining audio recordings, and securing data. I also reviewed the audio recordings, notes, and transcriptions several times for accuracy.

Data Analysis Results

I conducted this phenomenological research study to discover more about the experiences of certified equine specialists in the use of equine-assisted activities and therapy in psychology and counseling for mental health and wellness, as well as why PATH Intl was chosen for certification. I also asked why use horses, and how are horses

effective for mental health and wellness. I used semistructured telephone interviews to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the experiences of PATH certified equine specialists in providing equine assisted therapy and activities to their clients?

RQ2: What were the contributing factors in choosing PATH for certification in providing equine assisted therapy and activities?

I structured the interview questions to address each research question and to elicit full and rich descriptions of participants' experiences, opinions, and beliefs in relation to the use of horses in psychology and counseling for mental health and wellness. I focused the majority of the interview questions on the first research question, which involved the experiences of using equine-assisted activities for mental health and wellness. Qualitative analysis requires meticulous attention to details, language, and images to deep reflections and emergent patterns and meanings of the human experience (Saldana, 2016). As a result, several themes and subthemes emerged in the data from the rich descriptions provided by the participants to explain their meanings supporting the phenomenon of horses used in psychology and counseling for mental health and wellness.

I used thematic analysis in this research study to explore the meanings and patterns emerging from the rich, detailed experiences, opinions, and attitudes expressed by the participants. As described by Ravitch and Carl (2016), thematic analysis also developed themes to answer the research questions.

The Experiences of PATH Certified Equine Specialists

The majority of interview questions focused on the experiences of PATH Intl certified equine specialists in using horses in psychology and counseling for mental

health and wellness. The final interview question focused on why PATH Intl had been chosen as the certifying organization, in which participants were asked to describe the credentialing factors. The experiences of PATH Intl certified equine specialists depicted eight themes, which each included several sub-themes. The exploration of the credentialing factors in choosing PATH Intl resulted in four main themes and several sub-themes. The analysis of these themes and subthemes are described below.

Theme 1: Why Horses for Mental Health and Wellness?

The theme of “Why Horses for Mental Health and Wellness” focused on why horses are suitable for psychology and counseling and how they are effective in mental health and wellness. Participants provided connections between natural horse behavior, activities with horses, and applications to real-life situations to support why using horses for mental health and wellness is effective. Their descriptions were also supportive of the following sub-themes: nature, the power of the herd, and a nonjudgmental approach. The following section details each of the subthemes.

Nature. Spending time in nature was a key component expressed by participants as to why horses are effective in mental health and wellness. Participants noted the non-traditional approach away from traditional office settings, as well as the disconnect from technology. Pt1 described how interacting with horses provides many different levels of networking away from various forms of technology and social media platforms, as well as the chance to simply spend time in nature. Pt4 and Pt8 also described several activities, such as trail-riding, that connects horses, humans, and nature. Pt8 also noted that the natural aspect of working with horses

allows equine assisted activities and therapy to be a holistic approach for mental health and wellness, as well as an alternative to medicine. Pt6 emphasized that being with horses and nature also teaches people to value experiences rather than materialism. Spending time in nature with horses also provides the opportunity to observe the power and dynamics of the herd.

Power of the Herd. The power and dynamics of the herd was referenced by participants throughout the interviews. Pt8 asserted that humans needs to “work more like a herd.” Several participants shared the same sentiment through the description of “observing the herd” as an introductory activity when engaging with horses for mental health and wellness. Pt2 and Pt8 attributed the strength and power of the herd to the hypervigilance of horses as prey animals. Pt1 spoke of the horses’ awareness of their physical surroundings and emotions helps humans to be in a state of “relaxed attention” rather than stressed or anxious. Using nonverbal communication, the horses observe each other for signs of these dangers. If a threat is perceived, the horses will focus attention on the potential danger and decide as a group how to proceed. If danger is not imminent, the horses will “let it go,” as described by 60%of participants. Unlike horses, as Pt4 notes, humans overcomplicate things and hold onto tension which leads to responses in anger. In being more like the herd, the release of these emotions is the reward.

Pt3 stated that by observing and understanding the dynamics of the herd, humans gain a further understanding of the nonverbal language of the horse. As a result, Pt3 emphasizes the observation of the herd as part of equine-assisted activities and therapy, which helps humans to gain respect for the horses’ territory and also to become more aware of which horse they would like to work with in therapy and learning. Pt3, as well

as Pt8, also asserted that through the observation of the dynamics of the herd, humans can gain further insight into trust, respect, and relationships. Likewise, Pt7 connected these ideas to hierarchies and social positions in society. Humans, like horses, have different social positions and are at different levels of the hierarchy but do not always engage in trust and respect in these relationships. Pt7 noted that, as a result, horses are “social lubricants” for humans.

Non-Judgmental. The nonjudgmental attitude of horses was emphasized throughout the interviews by the participants. In connection with the aspect of nature, participants noted that the non-traditional setting for a therapeutic approach, as well as the horse being part of the therapy session, eliminates the stigma and “doom and gloom,” as described by Pt5, that is the typical connotation of therapy. Participants described the notion that horses just accept people for who they are without setting expectations or passing judgment. Pt7 described a potential goal of therapy to “accept how you are just as the horse accepts you.” Pt2 asserted that the nonjudgmental attitude that horses convey leads to stronger development of empathy. In addition to noting that “horses don’t judge,” Pt3 described horses as being able to just hold space with humans. Pt6 attested that the without the presence of judgment and pressure, clients of equine assisted activities and therapy are able to break down barriers and move forward with

positive growth. Pt5 concluded that by being nonjudgmental, horses allow humans to be our own authentic selves.

Table 2

Why Horses for Mental Health and Wellness

| Sub-themes | Respondent Participant Responses |
|-------------------|--|
| Nature | <p>Horses connect us to the outdoors and nature.</p> <p>Horses take you away from the desk and out of the office.</p> <p>Horses give us a chance to move away from technology and a fast-paced world to connect to nature.</p> <p>People feel less pressure in a more natural setting compared to traditional set-ups.</p> <p>Working with horses is an alternative to taking medications.</p> |
| Power of the Herd | <p>Horses, like dogs, are used in therapy, but horses are unique and offer more flexibility due to the dynamics of the herd.</p> <p>Horses are like dogs, but they evolved to live in herds.</p> <p>The power of the herd relies on the alpha horse, who is the lookout and is hypervigilant.</p> <p>The dynamics of the herd helps us to understand the language and nonverbal communication of horses.</p> <p>Horses have a herd mentality, which makes them intuitive to emotions.</p> <p>Horses are prey animals, and their power is in the herd through nonverbal communication.</p> <p>Observing the herd is an important introductory activity in equine-assisted activities and therapy.</p> |

Table 2 (continued).

| | |
|----------------|--|
| Non-Judgmental | <p>The horse teaches you to accept how you are just as the horse accept you.</p> <p>Horses don't hold anything against you.</p> <p>Horses are more forgiving.</p> <p>Christ doesn't judge us, and horses don't judge us either.</p> <p>Horses don't judge.</p> <p>Horses offer no judgement and no pressure.</p> |
|----------------|--|

Theme 2: Communication

Each of the participants in the research study emphasized the role and importance of communication in working with horses for mental health and wellness. As Pt8 emphasized, “more communication is consistency.” Participants’ descriptions of working with horses included the sub-themes of the nonverbal language of the horse, the connection between communication and relationships, and the evolvment of emotions.

Non-Verbal. Non-verbal communication, including body language and facial and emotional expressions was described by seventy percent of the participants in this study. Pt3 noted how understanding the nonverbal language of the horse lets humans know when it is safe, as well as the awareness of what they are saying to us and how we are communicating with them. Pt4 also emphasized to be aware of how we are asking the horse to do something, as well as engagement with the horse and being mindful of body language and facial expressions. Although horses do not ask questions or lie, as Pt 7 noted, they can still detect our moods or anxiety through nonverbal cues. Horses also communicate nonverbally by feeling

our levels of vibrations and frequencies to detect our emotions as described by Pt8. Likewise, participant Pt2 noted the importance of eye contact, body language, and nonverbal energy between humans and horses.

Although horses are nonverbal, Pt1 noted the importance of having a verbal conversation with horses while completing activities such as grooming and to be aware of when we are sending unclear messages to the horse. Additionally, participants Pt5, Pt7, and Pt8 noted how understanding the language of the horse helps humans to improve social skills, interactions and networking with others, which strengthens relationships and confidence.

Relationships. Participants noted that the aspects of clients' relationships with the horses are transferrable to other relationships. Pt8 asserted that clients engaged in equine activities and therapy are able to transfer learning with the horses to relationships with family and friends, as well as new relationships. Pt7 described how some people try to maintain relationships by pleasing others, but horses teach you how to assertively manage relationships and effectively saying, "No." Pt4 was quick to note that activities with horses "don't only apply to the arena." Pt6 also affirmed that interactions with horses help people to learn how to set positive boundaries in relationships as well. Pt2 also cited the importance of establishing boundaries in relationships by encouraging participants in equine activities to ask themselves, "Why are you letting that horse push you around?" Additionally, Pt8 described an activity for couples as "blindfolded grooming" in which one spouse guides the spouse wearing the blindfold in selecting the right tools and the process

of grooming the horses, which leads partners to understand the needs of each other, as well as serving each other. This activity leads to communication, trust, and building a partnership.

Emotional Expression. This subtheme of communication explains how interacting with horses improves the expression of emotions. Several aspects related to the development or improvement of specific emotions are discussed later in this chapter.

Participants noted that prior to engaging in equine-assisted activities and therapy, clients tended to be very closed, quiet, and distrustful. However, after interacting with horses, Pt8 described clients are more open and expressive, with growth in demonstrating trust and empathy. Pt7 asserted that humans tend to hold onto negative emotions, such as guilt and anger, but that horses help humans gain emotional intelligence.

Clients learn more positive approaches for expressing negative emotions. Likewise, Pt2 described clients, who were previously angry or distrustful, as demonstrating a more calm and assertive expression of emotions. Pt7 also asserted that once there is an awareness of these emotions, they need to be let go in a responsible way. Pt7 described in length that horses help humans to “leave guilt behind in a responsible way,” and “don’t carry feelings for the rest of your life; they are too heavy.” The participants’ descriptions of elements of communication are shown in the table below.

Table 3

Communication

| Sub-themes | Respondent Participant Responses |
|----------------------|---|
| Non-verbal | <p>Horses nonverbal language teaches us to learn to read emotional and facial expressions.</p> <p>Horses feel and respond to levels of vibrations and frequencies.</p> <p>Horses don't ask questions, and they don't lie.</p> <p>Horses are nonverbal, but they use body language to teach us what not to say.</p> <p>Horses teach us to use body language and facial expressions to understand and follow simple instructions.</p> |
| Relationships | <p>Horses teach us the importance of setting boundaries.</p> <p>Horses connect us with like-minded people.</p> <p>Horses help us to recognize that "it's not all about me" and to understand how serve others in relationships.</p> <p>Interactions with horses teaches us how to nurture and cultivate our relationships with others.</p> <p>Using horses as partners, not tools, builds trust and assertiveness.</p> <p>You have to be a partner before you can be a teacher.</p> |
| Emotional Expression | <p>Horses teach us to leave guilt behind in a responsible way.</p> <p>Horses teach us not to carry negative emotions-they are too heavy.</p> <p>Horses help humans gain emotional intelligence.</p> <p>Horses teach us that when we are tightened up, we get no release from those negative emotions.</p> <p>Horses help humans learn to develop and show trust and mutual respect.</p> |

Theme 3: Flexibility of Equine Assisted Activities and Therapy

The flexibility of equine-assisted activities and therapy applied to several different aspects, as described by participants. The participants emphasized that there was no limit as to who could work with the horses. Pt6 noted, “There is a horse-related activity for everyone.” Likewise, when asked to describe the structure of an equine therapy session, Pt8 responded, “There is no such thing.” Participants asserted that the equine-assisted activities are purposefully tailored to the needs of the client. Sixty percent of participants compared the development and use of activities to that of an individualized lesson plan created in a similar method to how teachers create lesson plans and activities for a classroom. Activities including horses for mental health and wellness are based on the needs and goals of the clients and include both unmounted and mounted activities for diverse individuals, groups, and populations.

Diverse Populations. Sixty percent of participants noted that veterans were part of the groups and populations served in equine-assisted activities and therapy programs by participants. Pt2 asserted that interacting with horses helped veterans, as well as other participants, to see the bigger picture, to be in the moment, and to let things go. Pt2 also noted an observed quality of life for veterans and other participants in horse-related activities. Additionally, Pt3 also described the assistance of horses in learning to let things go, as well as improved confidence, awareness, and communication. Pt3 also noted decreased triggers and symptoms for PTSD, as did Pt5. Pt5 also observed reduced levels of anxiety for veterans and other participants, as well as the opportunity to return to their

authentic selves. Additionally, Pt5 noted that her program was located near a military base and served as an important connection for veterans. Pt4 described equine-assisted activities and therapy with veterans in connection with personal military service and connections, as well as being part of the *Wounded Warrior Program*. Like Pt4 and Pt5, Pt6 also noted the importance of finding connections and common ground for veterans and other participants. Pt6 and Pt8 also asserted that participation in equine-assisted activities and therapy also helped veterans and other participants to find a new purpose and direction, as well as rebuilding relationships and establishing trust.

In addition to veterans, several other individuals, groups, and populations are served in the equine-assisted activities and therapy programs established by the participants in this research study. Fifty percent of participants ascribed to working with all age groups, including children, although Pt1 noted participants should be ages 4 and older. Pt1 also stated that equine-assisted activities and therapy works for anyone, including individuals with autism, cerebral palsy and multiple sclerosis. While Pt7 described working with children and young adults, a preference was noted for working with adult clients as they have more control over their lives and goals whereas children have too many variables that are beyond their control. Likewise, Pt8 also noted working with all populations, including veterans and their families, as well as adults and children with cognitive disabilities, couples, churches, and organizations. Pt8 also described a form of equine-related activities known as corporate coaching, in which individuals and groups from corporations participate in equine activities for team and relationship building, as well as self-awareness and improvement in communication and leadership

skills. Additionally, Pt4 described working with veterans, nonverbal clients, children and adults with cerebral palsy, special needs clients, as well as handicapped and able-bodied individuals. Pt6 also works with veterans in equine-assisted activities and therapy, in addition to at-risk youth and individuals enrolled in addiction and recovery programs. Pt6 also facilitates equine activities for seniors to help with memory care and improvement. Additionally, Pt6 also asserts that equine-related activities also help individuals with fertility issues.

Although these individuals, groups, and populations were described by the participants in this research study, each participant emphasized that there are no limits to who they serve in their programs. Most participants also noted that there were no restrictions as to who could engage in equine-assisted activities and therapy. Pt5 and Pt6 stated that although she has weight restrictions for her mounted programs, clients can interact with horses through unmounted activities while engaging in physical activity and learning weight management. The needs and goals of each individual, group, and population served in their programs guide TRIs and ESMHL to develop the structure of each activity for mental health and wellness.

Open Structure. Similar to the responses regarding clients in equine-related activities, participants could not provide a “typical” answer to describe the structure of an equine therapy session. When asked about the structure of equine activities and therapy responded, “There is no such thing.” Sixty percent of

participants compared the equine activities to classroom lessons developed by teachers for the needs of students.

While some participants described a general structure for some equine-assisted activities, most emphasized there was no such thing as a set structure because activities are differentiated for the individual needs and goals of clients. Pt1 described the structure of a session with horses as comprised of three roles: the therapist, the TRI, and the ESMHL working together while noting that the structure of each session was also dependent upon the needs of the individual. Additionally, seventy percent of participants used common phrases such as, “no such thing as a standard structure,” “lesson plans for each,” “based on history,” and “depends why they are here,” to describe the structure of equine-assisted activities and therapy. The participants also compared the structure of equine-interventions to that of a classroom-based lesson from a teacher with the inclusion of a warm-up, lesson or activity, and a closing reflection or activity. Pt5 described activities to typically consist of a 1-hour format that includes a demonstration or modeling activity, as well as journaling to reflect what they saw, learned, and what they need to work on with the horses. Pt7 described matching the proper horse to the client based on their history or medical records, as well as warm-up activities performed near the horse to gain mind, body, and emotional awareness. Pt3 also described the structure of equine activities to include observing the herd, meeting the horses, and sitting in space with the horses.

Pt4 emphasized that equine-assisted activities and therapy programs can serve the handicapped and able-bodied individuals. As Pt2 asserted, “There is no limited population or age.”

Unmounted Activities. As previously described, observing the dynamics of the herd is an important introductory activity for using horses for mental health and wellness. In addition to observation of the herd, participants described other unmounted activities for diverse populations. Each participant described important aspects of grooming horses as an unmounted activity. Pt7 noted that equine specialists can gauge the emotions of clients in the way they approach the horse for grooming, as well as how they handle the equipment, which leads to an understanding of the needs of the client and development of future activities. Pt8 described an activity for couples as “blindfolded grooming” in which one spouse guides the spouse wearing the blindfold in selecting the right tools and the process of grooming the horses, which leads partners to understand the needs of each other, as well as serving each other. This activity leads to communication, trust, and building a partnership. Pt1 also noted the connection between communication and grooming by encouraging clients to talk with their horse and have an open conversation. Pt4 and Pt8 also connected grooming with picking up the feet as representative of trust and communication.

In addition to grooming, participants also noted general horse care, as well as tacking and saddling horses were also important unmounted activities. Participants engage in communication, awareness, and cognition simply by leading a horse. Fifty percent of participants asserted that leading horses is an important activity that helps build trust, communication, and aids in relationship building and partnership. Pt8 emphasized that partnership with the horse is the foundation of all other activities.

Pt3 described a unique unmounted activity that also contributes to the themes of awareness, emotions, and cognitions that help to improve mental health and wellness. The activity is described as “Warrior Painting” in which clients use Native American symbols to tell a story. Once clients tell their stories through warrior painting, they wash it all off the horse. This activity is a metaphor as washing off the paint is representative of “letting go.” Additionally, Pt3, as well as Pt4 and Pt7 emphasized reflection and journaling as important unmounted activities.

Pt6 uses the unique unmounted activity with horses for children called “Horse-Powered Reading.” Pt6 noted the improvement of reading skills and vocabulary, as well as improved memory processes and grades in school when children engaged in the activity of reading to horses. This activity also contributes to an increase in engagement and enjoyment for reading.

Pt8 also emphasized that the objective of equine-assisted and activities is not only about the horses and the skills that clients are learning but also what they are learning while doing the activities. Participants also noted that clients can transfer the learning in these activities to relationships with friends, families, colleagues, and new relationships. This concept was noted for both unmounted and mounted activities.

Mounted Activities. Seven out of eight participants described the use of mounted activities in equine-related interventions for mental health and wellness after engagement in unmounted activities. Similar to unmounted activities, participants emphasized that mounted activities were unique to the needs of individuals

clients. As a result, participants described diverse mounted activities to meet the needs of clients and to improve mental health and wellness.

Seven of the participants are certified through PATH Intl as *Therapeutic Riding Instructors* (TRI). These participants noted the therapeutic benefits of riding for several clients they were serving in their equine-assisted activities and therapy programs. Pt1, Pt2, and Pt8 noted therapeutic riding as an important mounted activity. Additionally, these participants, as well as Pt4, discussed the use of adaptive riding, which refers to a non-therapy type of equine-assisted activity that includes horseback riding and horsemanship skills to students with disabilities or special needs and is sometimes used synonymously with the term “therapeutic riding,” (Hallberg, 2018). Trail riding and obstacle course riding was also described by Pt1, Pt2, and Pt4 as a mounted equine-assisted activity that contributed to the themes of awareness, confidence, and cognition. Although certified as an *Equine Specialist in Mental Health and Learning* (ESMHL), Pt6 also asserted the positive outcomes of these mounted activities and noted the connections of the horse’s gait for adaptive riding, as well as the benefits of horseback riding for other physical, cognitive, social, emotional, and behavioral issues. Additionally, Pt5 also described the unique mounted activity of “Cowboy Mounted Shooting” as beneficial for veterans participating in equine-assisted activities and therapy. This activity not personally engaged veteran participants but also offers them the opportunity to teach the activity to new participants in the program, which contributes to the themes of awareness and confidence. It also connects veterans to the theme of the dynamics of the herd but is also represents the hierarchy of teaching and learning, as well as social position (Pt7), and is similar to a military structure (Pt3, Pt4, and Pt8). In addition to veterans, several other

individuals, groups, and populations are served in programs using equine-assisted activities and therapy for mental health and wellness.

Table 4

Flexibility of Equine-Assisted Activities and Therapy

| Sub-themes | Respondent Participant Responses |
|---------------------|---|
| Diverse Populations | <p>We are not pigeonholed into only serving certain groups.</p> <p>Our programs serve veterans, children with cognitive abilities, and couples. Everyone is welcome to participate in our programs.</p> <p>The horses work with children diagnosed with autism, as well as their caregivers and family members.</p> <p>Children, young, adults, and adults are involved in our programs.</p> <p>The horses work with children and adults with special needs.</p> <p>We have programs for veterans.</p> <p>We serve ALL populations.</p> <p>There are no limits as to who can participate in our programs. Some of our participants have autism, cerebral palsy, or multiple sclerosis.</p> <p>We have a memory care program for seniors, and addiction and recovery programs.</p> <p>Women with fertility issues have had positive outcomes after participating in equine therapy programs.</p> <p>Children have improved reading skills and grades in school after participating in Horse-Powered Reading.</p> <p>There is no age cap as to who can participate in our programs.</p> <p>We have corporate coaching programs with the horses.</p> <p>We work with families, couples, churches, organizations, and corporations.</p> |

Table 4 (continued).

| | |
|----------------|---|
| Open Structure | <p>There is no such thing as a set structure for equine activities.</p> <p>Lesson plans are created for each individual based on their needs.</p> <p>The structure of the sessions depends on the individual and his or her goals.</p> <p>Lessons are all different.</p> <p>The first session includes observe the herd, meet the horses, and be aware of which horse client wants to work with in the future sessions.</p> <p>Sessions are a 1-hour format that included observing different activities and journaling.</p> <p>We have group sessions that follow an eight-week curriculum.</p> <p>Sessions are 45 minutes, twice a week.</p> <p>Progressive skill sets are based on the individual.</p> <p>Goals and outcomes are tailored for the individual.</p> <p>Sessions include reflective journaling: What did you learn? What do you need to work on?</p> <p>Clients work with the horses for approximately six sessions in unmounted activities before riding the horses.</p> <p>The structure includes setting flexible goals without set expectations to release pressure from clients, which makes them more willing to change.</p> <p>It's called the "No Expectation Model."</p> |
|----------------|---|

Table 4 (continued).

| | |
|----------------------|--|
| Unmounted Activities | <p>Choosing the horses to work with is an important activity because it tells which needs the client is seeking.</p> <p>Horse care is always an important activity. Standing at the fence and watching the herd and observing the interactions of the horses.</p> <p>Meeting the herd is important to understand the nonverbal language of the horse.</p> <p>Grooming the horse; not just grooming but having a conversation with the horse.</p> <p>Haltering the horse is an important activity. You can ask the client, "What halters do you wear?"</p> <p>Leading the horse-think of what gives you guidance.</p> <p>Sitting in space with the horse promotes awareness and nonverbal communication.</p> <p>Warrior Painting-Client use Native American symbols to tell a story and then they wash it off. This symbolizes to just let it go.</p> <p>A popular couples' activity is "blindfolded grooming." One spouse leads the other blindfolded spouse to groom the horse. This activity says, "I'm serving your needs to make you happy instead of putting my needs on you."</p> <p>Grooming helps us figure out emotions in the way the person approaches the horse and handles the grooming tools.</p> <p>Every individual is different, so our program is adaptable.</p> |
|----------------------|--|

Table 4 (continued).

| | |
|----------------------------|---|
| Mounted Activities | <p>Clients work with the horses for approximately six sessions in unmounted activities before riding the horses. Trail riding gets clients out in nature, improving horsemanship skills, as well as competence and empowerment. The size of a horse can be daunting to some clients, and they do not want to ride the horse. After riding, clients have been more emotionally expressive and confident. Hippotherapy is a type of adaptive riding that helps clients improve physical health needs by feeling the gait and rhythm of the horse. Mounted equine activities prepares veterans to participate in a fun activity called, “cowboy mounted shooting,” where they can network and teach other veterans and have fun applying their horseback riding and shooting skills.</p> |
| Mental Health and Wellness | <p>Working with horses improved competence, self-esteem, and depression. Clients participating in equine activities have shown improved self-esteem and leadership, and also better able to deal with bullying. Activities with horses reduce symptoms of PTSD and anxiety. Working with the horses gives clients a sense of empowerment. Participating in activities with the horses has helped with addiction recovery, as well as infertility issues. Horses help humans to self-regulate emotions and have self-control.</p> |

Theme 4: Awareness

Participants in this research study also described the benefits of awareness after being engaged with horses. Participants noted that one learns after being in the presence

of horses, “It is not all about me,” (Pt2 and Pt3). Pt8 described that couples engaging in equine activities develop an awareness of their partner’s needs, which nurtures and cultivates the relationship. Pt2 stated that horses help humans to pay attention to details and to understand limits, noting that “horses keep us in check.”

Pt8 also noted that when in the presence of horses, it is essential to have mind and body awareness not only for growth and learning but also for physical safety. Pt3 added, “Horses let you know when it’s safe and not safe.” Additionally, Pt2, as well as Pt7, asserted that awareness also guides humans to “be in the moment.” Pt7 added that when working with horses we must let go of pressures and worry.

Pt4 noted the awareness of sensory overload when working with horses and taking a step back to take things in small steps. Pt4 also concluded that the self-awareness raised from interacting with horses gives humans the ability to “lay our old selves down and to pick our new selves up,” which is also a prompt to self-check emotions.

Self-Awareness. Pt4 noted the awareness of sensory overload when working with horses and taking a step back to take things in small steps. Pt4 also concluded that the self-awareness raised from interacting with horses gives humans the ability to “lay our old selves down and to pick our new selves up,” which is also a prompt to self-check emotions.

Other participants noted awareness of the mind. Pt8 noted to be aware of one’s mindset and being able to step outside of the self, and Pt7 noted how an awareness of the self also connects to a willingness to change. In connection with communication, awareness helps humans to understand the horse’s language and emotions.

Pt1 also described the awareness of how equine activities can be connected to life experiences and situations through metaphors. For example, when participants are putting a halter on a horse, they can use this activity as a metaphor to gain awareness of what halters they wear in their lives (Pt1). Another activity in which Pt1 described awareness and the metaphorical connection is when leading a horse. Participants can ask themselves, “What is leading or guiding me?” Additionally, awareness leads humans engaging in activities with horses to connect on many different levels with emotions.

Body Awareness. In addition to noting the large size and power of horses, participants Pt5, Pt6, Pt7, and Pt8 noted the importance of body awareness, including body position and the way one carries his or her body. Due to the herd dynamics and nonverbal connections to emotions, horses have an intuitive sense to clients’ body awareness.

Pt8 also noted that when in the presence of horses, it is essential to have mind and body awareness not only for growth and learning but also for physical safety. Pt3 added, “Horses let you know when it’s safe and not safe.” Pt5 and Pt 6 also noted physical fitness and body weight management as an important aspect of working with horses. Pt5 asserted that lifting weights and being physically fit contributes to positive interactions with horses. Pt6 emphasized that a fit body contributes to a fit mind.

Mindfulness. Other participants noted awareness of the mind. Pt8 noted to be aware of one’s mindset and being able to step outside of the self, and Pt7 noted how an awareness of the self also connects to a willingness to change.

Additionally, Pt2, as well as Pt7, asserted that awareness also guides humans to

“be in the moment.” Pt7 added that when working with horses we must let go of pressures and worry. Pt2 and Pt3 expressed that awareness leads to the attitude and thinking of “it is not just about me” and delineates feelings of entitlement. Pt1 emphasized the importance of being aware of one’s own presence, noting that horses teach humans that “it is ok to take up space in the world.” Additionally, Pt4 noted, “We are able to lay our old selves down and pick our new selves up to move on for growth and awareness.”

Table 5

Awareness

| Sub-themes | Respondent Participant Responses |
|----------------|--|
| Self-Awareness | It’s ok to take up space in this world. Be aware of your own presence. Be aware of when we are not being authentic. |
| Body Awareness | Body language is also being aware of body position and posture. How am I carrying myself? Body awareness also means being conscious of physical self and weight management. I need to move when stressed. |
| Mindfulness | It’s ok to take up space in this world. It’s not just about me. Let it go-horses don’t burn themselves out like humans. Be willing to change our perspective. Get pushed out of our comfort zones. Live simply. Horses are simple. Humans overcomplicate. Horses help us to achieve balance by understanding our limits. |

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Theme 5: Emotions

Emotional expression was noted earlier in this chapter as a sub-theme of communication. However, the nonverbal language of the horse and awareness of one's self, mind, and body, leads to a change or improvement for several types of emotions. Pt7 noted that horses are "like a mirror," and as much as one tries to hide emotions or pretend, the horses due to being a prey animal are instinctive of emotions. Emotions that were changed or improved after interacting with horses include sub-themes of confidence, respect, trust, empathy, and self-regulation, which were expressed by the participants.

Confidence. Interacting with an animal that weighs more than 1000 pounds can be a daunting experience, but it also brings confidence, as noted by many of the participants. Confidence is not just in reference to horsemanship skills or riding but also to many other aspects. Participants Pt2, Pt4, and Pt8 noted that clients engaging in equine assisted activities and therapy gain confidence through embracing challenges, discovering new skills, and the development of leadership skills. Pt1 spoke of competence and the feeling of, "I am the leader here."

Participants Pt6 and Pt8 noted confidence was gained through empowerment and validation after engaging with horses. Another aspect of confidence that people developed after participation in equine-related activities was the opportunity to develop one's own personality and to be authentic, which was described by Pt 3 and Pt5. These aspects of confidence, described by 60% of the participants, are able to be developed because horses do not judge, accept humans as they are, and

are authentic beings themselves. As Pt4 exclaimed, “Horses don’t hold anything against me!”

Respect. Horses demonstrate respect in the dynamics of the herd by following the lead of the alpha horse (Pt2). Interacting with horses helps clients to develop self-respect, as well as respect for others and their relationships. Participants described changes in feelings of respect depicted in relationships with the horses, which was applicable to “cultivating and nurturing new relationships” (Pt8). Sixty percent of participants described the mutual respect that develops between the horse and a client is applicable to relationships with friends, families, and colleagues.

Working with horses help clients to respect the needs of the others and to understand that each partner has to “give on each side,” as noted by Pt6. Horses also help humans to develop self-respect. Clients in equine-assisted activities and therapy learn to set boundaries and limits.

Trust. Trust was not an active emotion prior to clients interacting with horses. Participants noted that clients, such as at-risk youth or veterans, appeared distrustful upon initial engagement in equine activities. Pt described this response with the leader of a company during a corporate coaching session with horses.

Additionally, Pt4 noted that not only do the horses come to view clients as respected and trusted leaders, but the clients also begin to view themselves in this role. As Pt7 noted, “we learn to see ourselves through the horses.” Pt8 further asserted this notion by describing the following experience in using equine-assisted activities to develop leadership skills for corporations:

“A leader for the company tried to approach a horse to use as a partner in the session, but the horse kept moving away from the client. After repeated attempts to approach the horse, the company leader admitted fear and uncertainty being in the presence of the horse. Once the company leader faced these emotions and embraced the awareness of them, calmness and openness were able to prevail. At this moment, the horse accepted the company leader’s approach and began to participate in the activities.”

This example not only culminates the emotional aspects of interacting with horses, but also awareness, as well as elements of cognitive processes. As Pt8 noted, horses promote congruence between the ideas of “How am I asking?” and “What do others think about my emotions, attitudes, and behaviors?”

Empathy. Forty percent of participants described increased feelings of empathy for clients working with horses in equine-assisted activities and therapy.

Understand the emotions and language of the horse through nonverbal cues helps clients to develop empathy for the horses, as well as others. In connection with mindfulness, the “it’s not just about me” perspective created through interactions with horses helps people to know that they’re not only in their experiences but to also have empathy for others’ feelings and journeys.

Self-Regulation. Awareness of one’s emotions leads to self-check and self-regulation, as stated by Pt4 and Pt8, which leads to awareness of the pressures created by certain emotions. Pt8 described the separation of emotions from pressure after interacting with horses as learning to “dial up and dial down from pressure” as a means of relief. Pt7 perceived that many participants of equine

therapy and activities have learned to control emotions such as guilt and anger in a responsible way, as well as to strengthen emotional intelligence. Participants also connected the management of emotions to the idea of “let it go” (Pt2, Pt3, and Pt4). As Pt4 emphasized, when we are “tightened up,” we have no release, so therefore, “the release is the reward”. Likewise, Pt7 emphasized that emotions are too heavy to carry, and when we adopt the manner of the horse is letting go, we have everything to gain. Pt2 noted to always “choose to end on a good note.” Pt4 advised horses help us to “think less, feel more, and have fun!”

Table 6

Emotions

| Sub-themes | Respondent Participant Responses |
|------------|--|
| Confidence | <p>Working with horses helps humans to develop a sense of purpose, which gives them confidence.</p> <p>Interacting with a 1,000+lb animal gives humans a feeling of empowerment and confidence.</p> <p>Working with horses allows them to be willing to take risks and to change.</p> <p>Confidence developed from working with horses helps people to embrace challenges.</p> <p>The self-confidence and self-esteem developed from engaging in equine activities and therapy helps kids to deal with bullying.</p> <p>Interacting with horses gives people such confidence that they feel validated. People become confident in developing their own personality.</p> <p>Confidence leads to improved self-esteem and depression, as well as competence.</p> <p>Horses help us to learn, “I am the leader here.”</p> |

Table 6 (continued).

| | |
|-----------------|--|
| Respect | <p>The horse must be respected and treated like a partner, not a tool.</p> <p>The mutual respect developed in the relationship between a human and a horse is applicable to new relationships, as well as relationships with friends, families, and colleagues.</p> |
| Trust | <p>Trust is an important part of your relationship with the horse.</p> |
| Empathy | <p>Working with horses and building a partnership helps humans develop empathy to understand the experiences and needs of others.</p> <p>Horses help us to be mindful of empathy for others by asking ourselves, “How can I serve you instead of how can we fix this.”</p> <p>It is a humbling experience to work with horses and to have empathy for others.</p> <p>Horses hold space for us. Learning to just sit in space with the horse helps us to develop empathy for what others are going through.</p> |
| Self-Regulation | <p>Horses teach humans to dial up and dial down from pressure.</p> <p>When working with horses, we learn to separate emotions and pressure.</p> <p>Horses teach us to leave guilt behind in a responsible way.</p> <p>Horses let us know to let go of our emotions; don’t carry them-they are too heavy.</p> <p>You can’t be angry and interact with a horse. Horses teach us anger management.</p> <p>When we are tightened up, we get no release, and we respond with anger.</p> <p>Horses teach us that the release is the reward.</p> <p>End on a good note.</p> |

Theme 6: Skill Sets

Pt6 described horses as the “greatest teachers,” and how activities with horses teach us how to be a better partner and change our perspectives. Participants also noted improved critical thinking skills, problem-solving skills, leadership skills, and improvement in cognitive skills and processes as positive outcomes of equine-assisted activities and therapy.

Critical Thinking Skills. Pt3, Pt4, and Pt8 noted improved critical thinking skills, natural thinking progression, the development of a progressive skills set, and continuous learning. Pt8 emphasized that horses help humans to learn something new every day and to see the bigger picture. Pt7 noted that life is a continuous learning process. Horses show us that just when we think we know everything that we do not. The development of critical thinking skills helps keep humans open to seeing new perspectives and being lifelong learners.

Problem-Solving Skills. Pt7 noted the development of problem-solving skills and emphasized that horses teach humans that “life is a continuing learning process,” and to “part of the solution not the problem in a complicated world.” Pt7 also professed that horses have a healing power that leads to increased understanding, making better choices, and control of life. Horses engage in these aspects through

the dynamics of the herd, which is why observing the herd is a key introductory activity in equine-assisted activities and therapy.

Leadership Skills. Confidence and awareness stemming from interactions with horses helps humans to develop or improve leadership skills. As described previously by Pt8, often in corporate coaching, company leaders attend sessions with horses believing they are strong leaders. Interacting with horses improves leadership skills because now even the most accomplished leaders have an awareness of how and what they are asking of others, as well as how others perceive them. Additionally, confidence helps clients in equine-assisted activities to become empowered and be viewed by the horse as a trusted and respected leader, which is transferrable to other relationships.

Cognitive Skills and Processes. In addition to mind, body, and emotional awareness, participants described the enhancement of cognitive skills after engaging in equine assisted activities and therapy. Pt6 described a horse-powered reading program that helps clients improve not only in reading skills but also in memory processes, as well as grades in school. Pt6, as well as Pt2 , also asserted that equine-related activities help to improve memory and thinking skills for seniors.

Pt6, as well as Pt2 , also asserted that equine-related activities help to improve memory and thinking skills for seniors. Additionally, Pt5 and Pt7 noted that increased positive cognition also reduces triggers to posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depression after interactions with horses.

Psychosocial Skills. In connection with the improvement of positive emotional expression, participants also noted the development of improved psychosocial skills. Pt7 described that the communication between horses and humans in equine activities helps clients to be able to talk to others and to network and referred to horses as “social lubricants.”

Table 7

Skill Sets

| Sub-themes | Respondent Participant Responses |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Critical Thinking | Horses teach critical thinking skills that includes being open to new ideas, skills, and perspectives. |
| Problem-Solving Skills | Horses help horses to learn better coping skills. Be part of the solution, not the problem in a complicated world. |
| Leadership | Through herd observation, clients learn about situational leadership. The activity of leading a horse connects to the herd by helping clients to explore their own position in society. Where are they in the hierarchy? Leadership means setting boundaries but still having open trust, respect, and communication. When working with horses, we learn to set boundaries and say, “I am the leader here.” |
| Cognitive Skills and Processes | Life is a continuous learning process and works in all directions. Interactions with horses have helped clients show less symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder and to think differently about their triggers. The seniors working with horses in the memory care program are learning how to cope with dementia and other memory issues. |

Table 7 (continued).

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Psychosocial Skills | When grooming a horse, have a conversation with the horse. This communication helps clients in equine activities to have improved psychosocial skills with others. |
|---------------------|--|

Theme 7: Professional Enrichment

Participants described how working with horses is exemplary of professional enrichment through purpose, community relationships, and the programs created by incorporating horses into psychology and counseling.

Purpose. Several participants noted that their equine activities and therapy programs were second careers. Pt3, who was one of the first to complete the equine specialist in mental health and learning certification through PATH Intl, noted that the one of the purposes in using horses for mental health and wellness is to create activities that are mutually beneficial for both humans and horses. Pt3 also connected a career in special education with equine-related activities. Twenty percent of participants described a military background or connection that inspired their professional purpose of created equine-assisted activity and therapy programs. Pt6 described the link between PATH Intl programs and Special Olympics, and Pt8 noted previous careers in which horses were used for

entertainment purposed, stating that now the purpose is “to serve; not to entertain.”

Community. Ninety percent of participants are non-profit organizations that are using horses to help others. Participants noted the importance of having positive community relationships as support for being able to continue offering equine services to diverse groups and populations. Pt4 discussed the development of programs for veterans in conjunction with the local community’s Wounded Warrior Program. Pt5 described a close affiliation with the local Air Force base as a partnership for improving the quality of life for veterans. Twenty percent of participants also described having a partnership with local mental health counselors and therapists to develop mutually agreed upon goals for client in equine therapy programs. Participants noted how these community relationships are beneficial because they are all working together to give others a sense of purpose and the opportunity to be part of a positive environment for mental health and wellness.

Programs. Participants described the professional programs they were able to develop by using equine-assisted activities and therapy for mental health and wellness. Pt5 noted the Equine Services for Heroes Program created through affiliation with PATH Intl, as well as the development of the Cowboy Mounted Shooting Program. Pt6 and Pt 8 also described successful programs for veterans, which have both been featured in the local news and social media posts.

Additionally, Pt6 uses a Horse-Powered Reading Program to help local students improve in reading skills and grades in school.

Table 8

Professional Enrichment

| Sub-themes | Respondent Participant Responses |
|------------|---|
| Purpose | I want to serve rather than entertain. I used to be an equestrian coach for the Special Olympics, but now I can use this new type of therapy to teach others about themselves and horses. |
| Community | Equine activities connects our organization with other programs in the community. We are connected with the Wounded Warrior Program. Our programs connect our clients with the community and other programs. Donations from other community organizations are vital to our programs. |
| Programs | Equine Services for Heroes Cowboy Mounted Shootings Wounded Warrior Programs Corporate Coaching Senior Memory Care |

Theme 8: Personal Enrichment

Personal enrichment was clearly emphasized by the equine specialists who participated in this research study. Participants could not contain their joy and enthusiasm when describing their daily work with horses and humans.

Purpose. Although participants described clients engaged in equine activities and therapy as gaining a sense of purpose through their interactions with horses, they also emphasized that they also felt a personal sense of fulfillment in bringing

horses and humans together. Participants also described that in using horses to help others, they continue to learn new skills and new things about themselves.

Self-Care. Self-care is fundamental (Pt5) and vital (Pt8). Horses keep you honest, and if you are out of balance, they will let you know (Pt2). Participants described various activities learned through engagement with horses to ensure that they make time for self-care while helping others. Pt1 described a self-care activity learned from horses in which humans can put their heads down like a horse to activate the sympathetic nervous system, as well as to move when stressed to release endorphins. Pt3 and Pt8 emphasized the connection to nature and to go for a walk. Pt5 and Pt6 emphasized the importance of physical fitness. Pt5 said good physical health leads to a guide mind and lifting weights or working on one's own body is an important part of self-care. Pt3 and Pt7 emphasized learning to let go of negative emotions, and Pt4 and Pt8 noted that taking a step back and taking things one step at a time are also important to self-care.

Reflections. Participants clearly conveyed positive reflections of their work with horses and humans. Their reflections conveyed people who are fulfilled and gain personal satisfaction in using equine-assisted activities and therapy to help others. Participants emphasized that their equine programs not only help clients with personal growth but also themselves. Pt4 emphatically noted that "it is a privilege to work with horses and to help others," and "What I do is a gift." Pt4 also asserted that although the horses are helping others, "I get so much more out of this." Pt7 supported these sentiments by stating that "knowing the healing power

of horses helps me to take better control and understanding of my life.” Pt2 asserted, “Horses keep you honest and in check,” and Pt3 exclaimed, “This is the most wonderful thing I have ever done!” Additionally, Pt7 noted that horses are “beneficial to my life,” and have helped me to “gain emotional intelligence, as well as physical health.” Pt8 described a past career in entertainment and performance with horses that “cannot hold a candle to what I do now.” Pt8 supported this statement by noting that using horses for mental health and wellness helps to serve others, watch people evolve, and engage in personal growth and learning. As Pt5 emphasized, “Horses are magical!”

Table 9

Personal Enrichment

| Sub-themes | Respondent Participant Responses |
|------------|---|
| Purpose | Working with horses gives me the opportunity to watch people evolve while learning myself. How do we really understand and make our connection with the horse? |
| Self-Care | Knowing the healing power of horses helps me take better control of my life. Take things one step at a time. Understand your limits. Make time for things you enjoy. You have to move when stressed-walk to build endorphins. I put my head down, like a horse, to activate the sympathetic nervous system. Self-care is vital. Horses let you know when it is time to decompress. |

Table 9 (continued).

| | |
|-------------|---|
| Reflections | <p>Working with horses is a humbling experience.</p> <p>Horses keep you honest.</p> <p>I am fortunate every day.</p> <p>Horses are magical.</p> <p>Horses are the greatest teachers.</p> <p>I have met so many amazing people because of horses.</p> <p>Think less, feel more, have fun.</p> <p>Working with people and horses is the most wonderful thing I have ever done.</p> <p>Horses make me a better person.</p> <p>I get so much more out of this.</p> <p>It is a privilege to work with horses and to help others.</p> <p>What I do is a gift.</p> |
|-------------|---|

Factors in Choosing PATH Intl for Certification

Theme 1: Credibility

Pt1 described PATH Intl as the “grass roots” of the equine-assisted activities and therapy organizations, and Pt7 asserted that PATH Intl is the most credible in the industry with the most complete and responsible programs in the industry. Pt3 referred to PATH Intl as “established” and “top-notch.” These participants also noted the contribution of the ethics and standards of PATH Intl, as well as its programs being mutually beneficial for horses and humans. Pt6 also noted the longevity and sustainability of PATH Intl and its “white-glove treatment.” Participants also noted PATH Intl’s credibility for its consideration of the mental health of humans, as well as the horse. Pt8 noted that PATH Intl. also maintains credibility as one of the largest organizations for equine-related certifications with more than 8,500 certified instructors worldwide. PATH Intl is known for establishing and maintaining the industry standards for equine-related interventions

(Hallberg, 2018). As a result, the sub-themes of credibility are history, safety, accountability, and accreditation.

History. PATH Intl was originally established in 1969 as the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA), which attests to the longevity of its organization, as noted by Pt6 and Pt7. In 2011, the NARHA changed its name to The Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH Intl) to provide support for licensed therapists, as well as non-licensed instructors and educators using equine-assisted activities and therapy for physical and mental health and wellness (Hallberg, 2018). PATH Intl is a global authority, resource, and advocate for equine-assisted activities and therapy to inspire and enrich the human spirit (PATH Intl, 2018a). Pt5 asserted that the standards developed by PATH Intl were an important factor in truly helping others and not just about the money.

PATH Intl has more than 300 thousand accredited centers (Pt5) and is one of the largest organizations for equine-related certifications with more than 8,500 certified instructors worldwide (SD). Additionally, PATH Intl offers accreditations for centers offering equine-assisted activities and therapy (Hallberg, 2018). PATH Intl's high level of credibility also increases the likelihood for its accredited centers to secure funding for non-profits through grants and sponsorships.

Safety. The safety standards for horses and humans required by PATH Intl were emphasized by all eight participants. Pt1 described the importance of PATH Intl's standards regarding lessons, activities, and safety and asserted that TRI and

ESMHL are field-tested on safety standards prior to certification. Pt5 also noted the field tests for both PATH Intl standards for activities and safety, as well as information about mental health disorders. Pt2, Pt6, and Pt8 also emphasized the safety standards for humans and horses, as well as the treatment of horses involved in equine-assisted activity and therapy programs. Pt7 stated that after conducting extensive research for certification in equine-related activities, PATH Intl's emphasis on safety and standards affirmed it was the most complete and responsible in the industry. Additionally, PATH Intl implements these standards for several diverse certification programs.

The Mental Health of the Horse. Although many equine specialists have anecdotally reported that horses appear to enjoy the work, participants in this research study emphatically noted that the mental health and welfare of the horse should also be part of the standards of equine programs and organizations. Providers of equine-related interventions have a vital responsibility to ensure the well-being of horses (Hallberg, 2018). PATH Intl not only supports mental health and wellness for humans, but also for horses. Pt2 noted that PATH Intl emphasizes that horses being used for equine-assisted activities and therapy be treated with respect, as “therapy can be stressful to the horse.” Pt1 emphasized this rationale with the statement, “The horse is not a tool.” Pt7 asserted that in conducting a search for a certifying organization, PATH Intl called attention to the well-being of the horse whereas other organizations did not define this aspect very well. Additionally, Pt2 and Pt6 noted the weight limits and limited number

of hours of work for horses. Pt6 emphasized that in addition to limited hours, there should be a balance of unmounted and mounted activities for horses. PATH Intl also continues to participate in research regarding the use of horses, and its effects, in psychology and counseling for mental health and wellness.

Table 10

Credibility

| Sub-themes | Respondent Participant Responses |
|------------|--|
| History | <p>PATH Intl is the grass roots organization of equine-assisted activities and therapy. PATH Intl, originally the NARHA, was one of the first to provide mutually beneficial activities for horses and humans.</p> <p>PATH Intl is an established organization that was one of the first to connect horsemanship to therapy.</p> <p>PATH Intl combines mental health with other horse-related activities.</p> |
| Safety | <p>Facilities accredited through PATH Intl must maintain all physical safety standards, as well as safety standards for horses and riders.</p> <p>Exams are given on safety prior to certification.</p> <p>PATH Intl requires safety standards for both unmounted and mounted activities.</p> <p>Safety standards are of the utmost importance.</p> <p>Safety minimizes the unknown.</p> <p>There is an emphasis on safety standards for both humans and horses.</p> |

Table 10 (continued).

| | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Accountability | <p>PATH Intl is a respected organization that has demonstrated longevity and sustainability.</p> <p>PATH sets goals and standards and is intense and holds people accountable.</p> <p>PATH promotes awareness of the correct terminology in using horses for mental health and wellness.</p> <p>PATH Intl has good safety standards and ethics, as well as training programs.</p> <p>PATH Intl demonstrates professionalism.</p> <p>PATH Intl is a supportive and welcoming organization.</p> <p>Other organizations are more focused on the study and implementation rather than standardization.</p> |
| The Mental Health of the Horse | <p>The horse is not a tool.</p> <p>There is a focus on the humane treatment of horses.</p> <p>Horses are treated with respect.</p> <p>There is an awareness that therapy can be stressful to horses.</p> <p>There are weight limits for riders.</p> <p>There are limits to a horse's work hours.</p> <p>Horses don't work more than six hours.</p> <p>There is a balance for the horses work hours in a day between unmounted and mounted activities.</p> <p>The horse's well-being is important.</p> |

Theme 2: Opportunities

The equine specialists certified through PATH Intl often noted the diverse opportunities available to serve all populations through unmounted and mounted activities. Participants also noted the continuing education opportunities offered in various formats for PATH Intl members and certified specialists. Ninety percent of participants have non-profit organizations and noted how PATH Intl's opportunity for accreditation can provide

support through grants and funding. Certifications, accreditation, and education were all sub-themes in the opportunities offered through PATH Intl.

Certifications. PATH Intl. currently offers the following certifications for equine therapy and activities: Certified Therapeutic Riding Instructor (CTRI), Therapeutic Riding Instructor (TRI), Equine Specialist for Mental Health and Learning (ESMHL), Therapeutic Driving Instructor (D), and Interactive Vaulting Instructor (IV) (PATH Intl, 2019). Participants for this research study noted that the diversity of the available offerings in equine-activities and therapy was a major credentialing factor in choosing PATH Intl. for certification. For Pt5 and Pt8, the combination of mounted and unmounted activities in the certifications was also a major factor. Pt8 also noted the combination of mental health with other horse-related activities. Pt5 also noted that the diversity of certifications through PATH Intl does not limit or “pigeonhole” instructors and specialists into only serving certain groups and populations. Participants also noted the development of the newly created CTRI certification, which was created as the result of extensive research. Each of the aspects contributes to the credibility of PATH Intl.

Accreditation. PATH Intl is a global authority, resource, and advocate for equine-assisted activities and therapy to inspire and enrich the human spirit (PATH Intl, 2018a). PATH Intl has more than 300 thousand accredited centers (Pt5) and is one of the largest organizations for equine-related certifications with more than 8,500 certified instructors worldwide (Pt8). Additionally, PATH Intl

offers accreditations for centers offering equine-assisted activities and therapy (Hallberg, 2018). PATH Intl's high level of credibility also increases the likelihood for its accredited centers to secure funding for non-profits through grants and sponsorships.

Education. Pt3, Pt7, and Pt8 noted the importance of PATH Intl.'s commitment to continuing education, including workshops, virtual conferences, and research. As a result, PATH Intl continues to offer new and evolving educational opportunities regarding equine-assisted activities and therapy. In addition to its website, PATH Intl also has its own YouTube Channel, which includes educational videos and information about equine-related activities. Pt4 noted how PATH Intl.'s continued research and educational opportunities have led to new certifications and programs, as well as the promotion of awareness for equine-assisted activities and therapy and the use of correct terminology.

Table 11

Opportunities

| Sub-themes | Respondent Participant Responses |
|----------------|---|
| Certifications | The certification process is the most complete and responsible in the industry. We are not pigeon-holed into only serving certain groups or populations. PATH Intl.'s certification offers unmounted and mounted activities. I am thinking about also getting the interactive vaulting certification. |

Table 11 (continued).

| | |
|---------------|---|
| Accreditation | <p>PATH Intl is a premier organization with over 300 thousand accredited centers worldwide.</p> <p>Accreditation and standards helps to secure grants and funding for non-profit organizations.</p> <p>PATH Intl offers several certifications but also the opportunity for facilities to become accredited.</p> <p>Accreditation allows facilities to turnkey their own certification trainings.</p> |
| Education | <p>PATH Intl offers helpful step by step guides to certification.</p> <p>PATH Intl members can take advantage of both face-to face conferences, as well as virtual conferences.</p> <p>PATH Intl has a YouTube channel that offers very informative videos.</p> <p>PATH Intl offers multiple certifications and programs.</p> |

Additional Findings

Although this research study sought to understand the experiences in using equine-assisted activities and therapy to help others for mental health and wellness, participants also described how the horse is a partner, and how equine-assisted activities and therapy connects to positive social change for horses and humans. The description of their own interactions clearly described how horses have improved the quality of their own lives, as well as the importance of the research study to raise awareness and inform others about the benefits of equine-assisted activities and therapy as an alternative to medicinal approaches and traditional talk therapy. Pt6 noted the equine-interventions for mental health and wellness is an approach that connects with psychology, as well as physical therapy and health.

Summary

I conducted this research study to explore the experiences of PATH Intl certified equine specialists in the use of horses in psychology and counseling for mental health and wellness, as well as why these individuals chose to obtain certification through PATH Intl.

I provided an overview of this research study and the findings in chapter 5. I also included an introduction and an interpretation of the findings, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research. I also included implications for social change and the conclusions resulting from this research.

Chapter 5: Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to summarize the findings presented in Chapter 4 about the experiences of using horses in psychology and counseling for mental health and wellness as described by individuals certified through PATH Intl. The research presented in Chapter 2 demonstrated that while much research attests to the beneficial effects of equine-related interventions for physical development and abilities, there is a lack of research depicting the psychological benefits of horse-related activities (Kendall et al., 2015). Additionally, there is a notable gap between personal passions, beliefs, and practices of equine specialists present in existing literature and the outcomes of scholarly research (Hallberg, 2018).

I explored the experiences of equine specialists in using equine-assisted activities and therapy for mental health and wellness in this phenomenological research study. I also studied the credentialing factors in selecting PATH Intl for certification. This study not only provides an understanding of the experiences of certified equine specialists and instructors certified through PATH Intl but also the positive psychological benefits of using equine-assisted activities and therapy as an alternative approach to traditional psychology and counseling methods for mental health and wellness.

I used purposeful sampling criteria to recruit participants certified in equine-assisted activities and therapy through PATH Intl. The criteria were verified by recruiting participants from social media groups affiliated with PATH Intl, as well as through the initial email contact with participants.

The interview guide created for this research study was validated through evaluation by the Walden dissertation committee, who are experts in qualitative research. I conducted semistructured interviews with seven women and one man between June 10, 2019 and July 2, 2019. The participants were all certified through PATH Intl as TRI or ESMHL.

During the interviews, participants shared their thoughts and experiences about helping others using equine-assisted activities and therapy. Participants described why horses are beneficial in helping others for mental health and wellness, which includes descriptions of the populations in their equine programs, the activities, and goals and outcomes. Additionally, participants described how using horses to help others has influenced their own mental health and wellness, and self-care routines. Participants also noted the credentialing factors in selecting PATH Intl for certification in equine-assisted activities and therapy.

Patton (2002) asserted that phenomenological analysis is used to explore the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experiences of a particular phenomenon for a group of people. I achieved these aspects of phenomenological analysis through the interviews with PATH Intl certified equine specialists. In order to address the gap in literature, I explored the concept of using horses to enhance mental health and wellness to provide a more in-depth understanding of the role of horses in psychology and counseling for mental health and wellness. Additionally, I used phenomenological analysis to gain an understanding of the daily experiences of equine specialists in setting goals, planning activities, and evaluating outcomes of equine-assisted activities and therapy. The semistructured interviews for this research study supported a phenomenological approach

through the provision of descriptive attitudes that emphasized the rich, detailed experiences of using horses to help others for mental health and wellness.

I used constructivism as the conceptual framework in this study to present the essence of the lived experiences of the equine specialists. I used the constructivist framework to explain the knowledge and learning that was based on the actions' and participants' reflections of their work in equine-assisted activities and therapy. Additionally, the constructivist framework asserts that humans not only construct knowledge and thoughts but also emotions (Crotty, 1998), which was emphasized by participants in describing the connections between humans and horses. Essentially, two of the main themes resulting in the data analysis of this research study were cognition and emotions.

I will present the interpretation of the findings by the themes and subthemes will in this chapter, followed the limitations in the study and recommendations for future research. I will also include the implications for social change and conclusions.

Interpretation of Findings

Horses have been connected with humans throughout history in diverse ways. Therefore, humans can construct many different meanings for the use of horses. The literature presented in Chapter 2 noted that horses were viewed as therapeutic for humans since the time of the early Greeks (Hallberg, 2018) and have continued to become an innovative and emerging approach to mental health treatment in modern research (Lee, Dakin, & McClure, 2014). When asked how horses are effective in activities for mental health and wellness, Pt8 responded, "How are they not?" The horse is central to the goals, activities, and outcomes in equine-assisted activities and therapy.

The experiences using equine-assisted activities and therapy described by equine specialists certified through PATH Intl provided a rich, descriptive insight into why and how horses are incorporated into psychology and counseling for mental health and wellness. Therapeutic riding instructors and equine mental health specialists certified through PATH Intl described why they use horses to help others, various activities and goals used in equine-related interventions, and how horses help with their own mental health and wellness, as well as the credentialing factors in selecting PATH Intl for certification. From the findings, it seems using equine-assisted activities and therapy is a beneficial and flexible treatment modality for diverse populations in the development of positive mental health and wellness. As Pt8 noted, “Humans need to work more like a herd.”

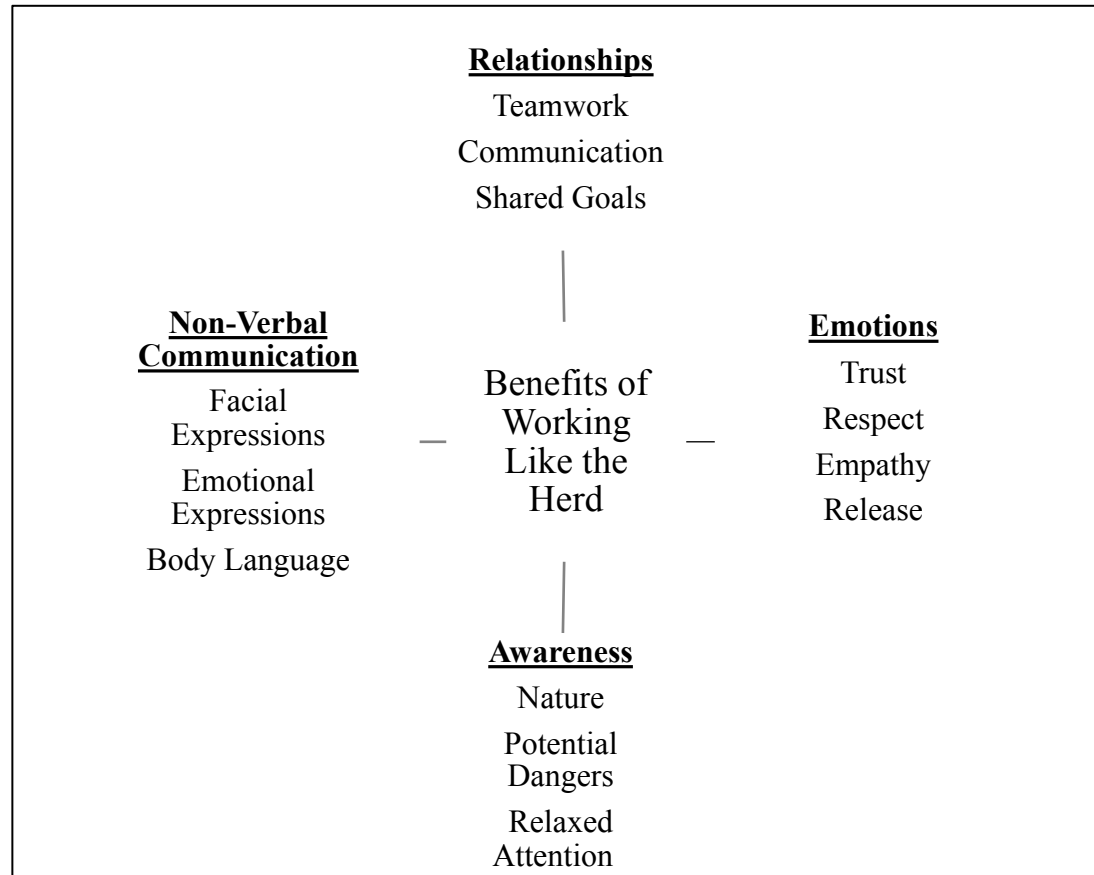
Work More Like the Herd

Horses are highly suitable for mental health and wellness due to being herd animals, which facilitates cooperation, competitions, and bonding among members (Bachi et al., 2011). Several participants described one of their introductory activities in equine-related interventions as “observing the herd” (Pt2, Pt3, Pt7, and Pt8). Observing a herd of horses can also demonstrate how horses share space and create and respect boundaries (Trotter, 2012). Through the observation of the dynamics of the herd, humans can gain improved trust, respect, and relationships. Awareness of communication, emotions, and cognition also helps humans to understand how they can behave more like the herd. Pt1 spoke of the horses’ awareness of their physical surroundings and emotions helps humans to be in a state of “relaxed attention” rather than stressed or anxious. Schroeder and Stroud (2015) asserted that equine-related interventions increased

mindfulness, body awareness, and boundaries. Using nonverbal communication, the horses observe each other for signs of dangers. If a threat is perceived, the horses will focus attention on the potential danger, and the horses will use teamwork to decide how to proceed. If danger is not imminent, the horses will “let it go,” as described by 60% of participants. Unlike horses, as Pt4 notes, humans overcomplicate things and hold onto tension which leads to responses in anger. In being more like the herd, the release of these emotions is the reward. Pt2 stated that horses help humans to pay attention to details and to understand limits, noting that “horses keep us in check.” Interactions with horses also raise awareness for the self-exploration of thoughts, emotions, and behaviors (McNamara, 2017).

Pt8 also noted that when in the presence of horses, it is essential to have mind and body awareness not only for growth and learning but also for physical safety. Pt3 added, “Horses let you know when it’s safe and not safe.” Additionally, Pt2, as well as Pt7, asserted that awareness also guides humans to “be in the moment.” Additionally, research studies have demonstrated that therapy involving horses may yield a variety of benefits, including confidence, trust, and communication (Frederick et al., 2015)

Figure 1. Work More Like the Herd



Constructivism is applied to the dynamics of the herd because knowledge is gained through the observation of the herd; humans learn from the behavior and structure of the herd; and humans apply these constructs to their own relationships and behavior, which is the adaptive function of constructivism. In connection with the educational theories of Jean Piaget, constructivism does not only consist of learning, gaining knowledge, and constructing meaning, but also the adaptive functions of a phenomenon (Fosnot, 2005).

Think and Behave Like Horses

In addition to working like the herd using horses in psychology and counseling may yield a variety of other benefits, including improved confidence (Frederik et al., 2015). Billany (2012) concluded that interacting with horses increased psychological well-being for women, including feelings of empowerment and confidence. Similarly, Wilson, Buultjens, Monfries, and Karimi (2017) suggested a range of improvement for adolescent clients, including confidence, self-esteem, and assertiveness. A research study conducted by Whittlesey-Jerome (2014) demonstrated that adult females showed greater improvement in confidence and self-efficacy after engaging equine-related interventions. Conclusively, the participants in this research study described the increase of confidence and related behaviors for clients engaged in equine-assisted activities and therapy.

Research has also demonstrated that equine-related interventions also provide youth with tools for leadership (Gibbons et al., 2016). Additionally, Pt4 noted that not only do the horses come to view clients as respected and trusted leaders, but the clients also begin to view themselves in this role. As Pt7 noted, “we learn to see ourselves through the horses.” Leadership skills were also perceived by the participants. Pt1 asserted that when working with horses, one develops the sense of, “I am the leader here,” which is applicable to other roles and relationship in daily life.

Finally, confidence was gained through the ability to be able to be one’s authentic self after interacting with horses. Authenticity is considered an important component of therapy (Hallberg, 2018). Horses are nonjudgmental and motivational, which is an effective concept in building confidence (Kern-Godal et al., 2016). The accepting and nonjudgmental attitude of horses was also emphasized by Pt3, Pt5, and Pt6. Pt7 noted

that humans “learn to accept themselves just as the horse accepts them.” Pt4 described her personal experiences stating, “Horses don’t hold anything against me. Humans overcomplicate, but horses are simple. Horses are more forgiving. Christ doesn’t judge us, and horses don’t either.” The opportunity to be one’s authentic self not only strengthens confidence but also leads to awareness on many different levels. Authenticity is commonly pair with self-awareness (Hallberg, 2018).

Engage in Diversity

Equine-assisted activities and therapy is a more flexible treatment modality than traditional approaches in psychology and counseling (Johns, Bobat, & Holder, 2016). Participants in this research study noted that using horses for mental health and wellness has been an effective treatment modality for diverse populations and groups, as well as mental health issues.

Jang et al. (2015) demonstrated that interacting with horses had a positive effect on social problems for children with ADHD. Guided interactions with horses as a nonpharmaceutical intervention for elderly clients with dementia also demonstrated increased social interaction (Dabelko-Schoeny et al., 2014), as well as for veterans and women experiencing symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (Ferruolo, 2015; Schroeder & Stroud, 2015). Likewise, equine-assisted activities also demonstrated a reduction in anxiety symptoms related to posttraumatic stress disorder for female victims of interpersonal violence (Schroeder and Stroud (2015) and military veterans (Ferruolo, 2015), which was also corroborated by Pt5. Frederick et al. (2016) also noted the positive impact of equine-assisted activities and therapy on feelings of hope and depression for at-risk youth.

A research study conducted by Gibbons et al. (2016) concluded that participation in equine workshops contributed to increase emotional regulation, as well as a decrease in violent and aggressive behaviors for at-risk Guatemalan youth. Wilson et al. (2017) and Johns, Bobat, and Holder (2016) noted that therapists using equine-related interventions perceived interpersonal and emotional growth for clients. DaBelko-Schoeny et al. (2014) described elderly patients as having reduced agitation and decreased verbal aggression and anxiety after interaction with horses, and Alfonso et al. (2015) study depicted a significant reduction in social anxiety for young women.

Be a Lifelong Learner

Lee and Makela (2018) concluded that future research studies should address the cognitive activities and benefits in using equine-assisted activities and therapy for mental health and wellness. Cognition is an important aspect of the conceptual framework of constructivism, which is a theory about knowledge, thoughts, and learning (Fosnot, 2005). I denoted that engaging in equine-assisted activities and therapy improves several areas of cognition, including reading, vocabulary, and studying skills (Pt6); memory processing and functioning (Pt2 and Pt6); critical thinking skills (Pt2 and Pt8); following instructions (Pt4), and the development of problem-solving skills (Pt7). McNamara (2017) also concluded in a research study with children and adolescents that equine-assisted activities and therapy also reveals a strong emphasis on problem-solving skills.

Participants in this study also described various cognitive activities and strategies used to promote these skills as adaptive functions to daily life, which included reflective journaling and writing, as well as horse-powered reading, which will be described in the subtheme of “activities” later in this chapter. Pt1 advises clients to think of metaphors

related to the different activities with horses, which is also connected to awareness. For example, when leading a horse, Pt1 advised clients to think, “What is guiding me? What goals am I moving toward?” Pt1 also encouraged clients to think of the different labels and boundaries they place upon themselves with the metaphor of “What halter am I wearing? Likewise, Pt2 emphasized to make connections with setting boundaries, as well as bullying, by thinking, “Why am I letting this horse push me around?” and “What can I do to change this behavior?” As Pt7 also noted, “Be part of the solution and not part of the problem.” Each of these aspects connects back to constructiveness through the awareness of emotions and communication with others. Engagement with horses teaching humans to be cognitively aware of how they are interacting with others or asking them to do something. Pt8 emphasized that the objective of equine-assisted and activities is not only about the horses and the skills that clients are learning but also what they are learning while doing the activities, which is the direct concept of constructivism.

In general, the participants cited learning was cited as a beneficial outcome of interacting with horses. Pt8 emphasized, “Horses are the greatest teachers, and there is something new to learn every day!” Pt7 asserted that “life is a continuous learning process and works in all directions,” and also described how horses help humans to develop problem-solving skills, which also emphasizes the adaptive functions built through constructivism. He added that these daily experiences with horses provide a better understanding of life and help us to become part of the solution and not part of the problem in a complicated world.

Cognitive processes were also connected to attitude and perspective. Improved cognition informs clients about the bigger picture, which denotes elimination of a self-

centered attitude, as well as the connections to those “aha” moments (Pt3) and “let it go” (Pt3 and Pt7). As Pt7 noted, “You can only change you. Don’t be a people pleaser.” Each of these aspects also attests to the herd behavior of horses.

Be Active

Equine-related interventions includes the use of diverse activities, such as grooming, handling, riding, driving, and teambuilding (Alfonso et al., 2015). Each of these activities are applicable to daily life skills and relationships, as the meaning behind the activity is constructed through engagement with the horses in these activities. Pt8 emphasized that the objective of equine-assisted and activities is not only about the horses and the skills that clients are learning but also what they are learning while doing the activities, which is the direct concept of constructivism.

The goals and outcomes of PATH Intl. consists of both unmounted and mounted activities with horses (Lee, Dakin, & McClure, 2014), which were described in detail by the participants in this research study. Unlike the research studies described in the literature, participants in this study compared the development and use of equine-related activities to that of an individualized lesson and asserted that the equine-assisted activities are purposefully tailored to the needs of the client. I depicted the whole-group studies in which all participants engaged in the same equine-related activities in the literature review in Chapter 2. The activities described in this study are based on the needs and goals of the clients and include both unmounted and mounted activities for diverse individuals, groups, and populations.

Unmounted Activities

In a research study assessing the benefits of equine-related interventions with female victims of interpersonal violence, Schroeder and Stroud (2015) concluded that unmounted activities, such as grooming and leading the horses were effective in managing symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder, raising awareness, and the development of positive personal relationships. Participants in this research study described a variety of unmounted activities, including observing the herd and grooming horses. Pt7 noted that grooming is an important unmounted activity as it depicts the emotions of clients in the way they approach the horse, as well as how they handle the equipment. The therapists use these interactions to construct the needs of the client, partner the client with the right horse, and prepare for the best activities to meet the needs of the clients.

Another unmounted activity described by Pt8 was “blindfolded grooming” in which one spouse guides the spouse wearing the blindfold in selecting the right tools and the process of grooming the horses. This activity helps clients to construct an understanding of each other’s needs, as well as how they can best serve each other to improve in communication, trust, and building a partnership.

An adaptive function constructed by participants is constructing the meaning of “let it go” in an activity described by Pt3 as “warrior painting.” In this activity, equine specialist provide safe paints for the horses and a series of Native American symbols that clients can use to construct a story. After clients share their stories through the painting of the Native American symbols on the horse, they proceed to wash the horse. The adaptive

function is that once clients constructed their story through the paints and symbols, washing it off symbolizes to “let things go.”

Each of these activities provides the initial foundation in building the relationship with the horses, which is the foundation of the phenomenon of using equine-assisted activities and therapy for mental health and wellness. Each of the participants described constructing this foundation through unmounted activities before proceeding to mounted activities.

Mounted Activities

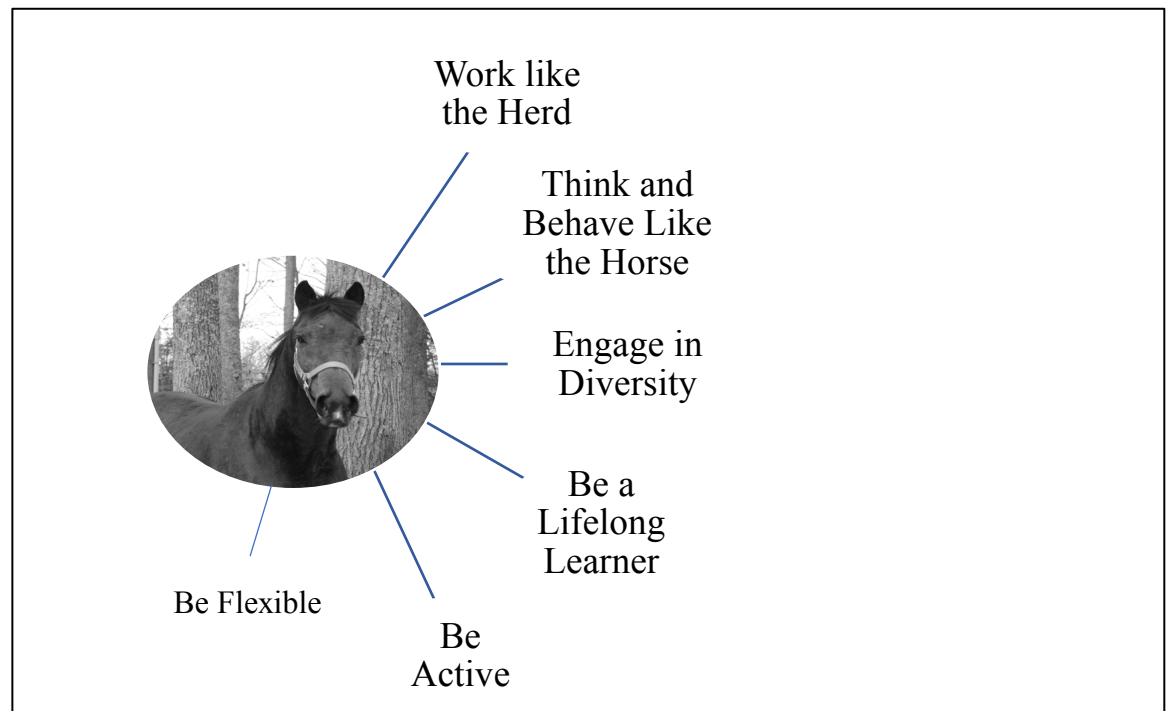
The movement of the horse is probably one of the most well-documented activities in using horses for both physical and mental health benefits (Hallberg, 2019). The benefits of mounted activities with horses can be found in ancient writings from the ancient Greco-Roman times (Bachi, Terkel, & Teichman, 2011). Hippocrates asserted that horseback riding provides a natural gait and healing rhythm for physical and physiological benefits (Hallberg, 2018). In addition to therapeutic riding, PL and JSHV described trail riding and obstacle course riding as beneficial to clients. This mounted activity is supported by the theme of cognition, as well as the conceptual framework of constructivism.

Be Flexible

Johns, Bobat, & Holder (2016) indicated that equine-related interventions is a more flexible and effective treatment modality in comparison to traditional office bound approaches in psychology and counseling. The participants in this research study supported this notion by emphasizing that the structure of equine-assisted activities and therapy sessions are structured by the needs of the individual. Seventy percent of

participants used common phrases such as, “no such thing as a standard structure,” “lesson plans for each,” “based on history,” and “depends why they are here,” to describe the structure of equine-assisted activities and therapy. As Pt4 exclaimed, “Think less, feel more, have fun!”

Figure 2. Be More Like a Horse



Limitations of the Study

There were several limitations in this research study. The limitations include limited diversity and multiculturalism, and potential researcher bias.

The research study was qualitative in nature, which typically allows for a small sample size. The sample size consisted of eight participants who were each certified in equine-assisted activities and therapy through PATH Intl. The participants consisted of

seven females and one male, which presents a lack of diversity in the study. Additionally, the geographic region of the study was limited to the United States and its territories, although PATH Intl has more than 8,500 centers worldwide. This aspect provided limitations into the use of horses for mental health and wellness for a diverse, multicultural perspective.

Bias was also a potential limitation in this study because the researcher has owned horses for nearly two decades and desires a future career in equine-related interventions. The researcher has been studying the use of horses as a potential means of alternative therapy in psychology and counseling for approximately ten years and has become very passionate about this type of intervention. However, although the researcher could relate to some of the aspects about horses presented by the participants, the researcher has no affiliation with the use of horses in activities intentionally used for mental health and wellness.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are several opportunities for future research for incorporating horses into psychology and counseling for mental health and wellness. Recommendations focus on the areas of a more diverse sample of participants and other organizations providing equine-assisted activities and therapy certifications.

More Diverse Sample of Participants

The replication of this research study with a group of participants that are more diverse in terms of gender and ethnicity would provide a greater perspective of the experiences of certified equine specialists using horses for mental health and wellness. This research study had only one male participant. Additionally, this male participant was

from Puerto Rico, and the other participants were all from the mainland of the United States. Since PATH Intl has more than 8,500 certified equine specialists worldwide, the study could be replicated with international participants.

Other Organizations Providing Equine-Assisted Activities and Therapy

Because the nature of this study is a qualitative methodology, the results of the study may be transferable to other certifying organizations. Additionally, the research study has the potential to be replicated by using the same methodology and framework to explore the experiences and perspectives of equine specialists certified through other credentialed organizations.

Dissemination of Findings

The findings of this research study will be disseminated by sharing the key themes and ideas with the participants. In the future, the data and findings will likely be submitted for publication, as well as presented at professional conferences. The study findings will also be used to advocate for increased awareness and use of equine-assisted activities and therapy for mental health and wellness as an alternative to traditional psychology and counseling approaches.

Implications of Social Change

This research study denotes that equine-assisted activities and therapy provides several implications to positive social change for both humans and horses. Bringing horses and humans together provides the application of a multicultural approach to traditional therapeutic measures in psychology and counseling that connects diverse populations with nature. Using a phenomenological approach, this research study constructed rich, detailed descriptions of social change for horses and humans.

Additionally, this study focused on the components of the PATH Intl model of equine-assisted activities and therapy and its philosophy of positive social change for humans and horses.

The participants in this study often attested to the healing power of horses, noting that engagement in equine-assisted activities and therapy gives humans a new purpose. However, this approach can also give horses a new purpose. There are more than 200,000 unwanted horses annually in the United States, and many of these horses are shipped to slaughter in foreign countries, enter rescue facilities, or are held on federal lands (Weiss et al., 2017). Equine-assisted activities and therapy programs provide a new vocation for horses, which, in some cases, can save them from abandonment or death (Hallberg, 2018).

Conclusions

Horses have fascinated humans across time and history and have been used for diverse purposes to help the advancement of humans.

The participants in this research study emphatically explained their experiences using horses to help others with mental health and wellness. Often, when people are asked to explain them *why* in doing something, they fail to articulate a clear response. The therapeutic riding instructors and equine mental health specialists certified through PATH Intl who participated in this research study clearly explained their own *why*, as well as *Why Horses?* The participants in this study clearly articulated the meaning of using horses in psychology and counseling for mental health and wellness using rich, detailed experiences of the role of horses in equine-related interventions through the descriptions of horse-related activities and behaviors, as well as the goals and outcomes

of equine-assisted activities and therapy. Research has demonstrated that horses are effective with diverse populations, from children, adolescents, and at-risk youth to women, veterans and the elderly. Horses have had positive impacts on children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, as well as those struggling with anxiety, depression, substance abuse, interpersonal violence, and posttraumatic stress disorder. Participants in this research study described using horses for a variety of issues for diverse populations. Horses have helped their clients to improve in confidence, communication, awareness, and emotions. Participants noted positive benefits for self-esteem, relationships, and discovering a sense of purpose. When asked to describe how horses are effective in equine-assisted activities and therapy, one participant hesitated before responding, “How are they not?” From the rich descriptions of using horses for mental health and wellness. It is easy to understand the meaning and perspective constructed by that participant. Additionally, perspectives from participants included, “Horses make me a better person,” and “This is the most wonderful thing I have ever done.” Participants spoke with joy and emphasized how helping others helps themselves and the horses.

Social change is the deliberate process of creating and applying ideas, strategies, and actions to promote the worth, dignity, and development of individuals, cultures, and societies, which results in the improvement of human and social conditions (Walden University, 2017). Bringing together horses and humans provides the application of a multicultural, alternative approach to traditional therapeutic measures that connects humans with nature. It is time to take a step back from a fast-paced society and to be in the moment; to take a step back and raise awareness of ourselves and others; to

understand the needs of others and nurture our relationships; to be mindful of how we are speaking to and interacting with others; to let go of all that is weighing us down; and to connect back to nature. It is essential to continue to give horses and humans a new purpose through the use of equine-assisted activities and therapy as an alternative approach in psychology and counseling for mental health and wellness.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

- 1) Let's begin by discussing why you decided to use equine assisted activities and therapy for mental health and wellness. Tell me about your decision to use this type of therapy to help others.

Probe: Why horses? (if not directly answered)

- 2) Tell me about how the horse is effective as a central part of equine interventions.
- 3) What general populations or groups without providing specific individual identities, do you serve in your equine-related therapy practice?

Probe: Why did you choose to work with these individuals/groups? (If not directly answered)

- 4) Could you describe the general structure of a typical equine therapy session?

Probe: Tell me about the expected outcomes for a typical session? (If not directly answered)

- 5) Could you describe some of the activities that are used with the horses during therapy sessions?

Probe: Tell me about how the goals of these activities are connected to mental health and wellness. (If not directly answered)

- 6) Tell me about how can participants apply what they have learned in working with horses to other situations or relationships.

Probe: How do you as a therapist/equine specialist support participants' efforts to apply their new skills and understandings?

- 7) Tell me what have you learned about yourself by working with horses to help others.

- 8) Tell me about how working with horses has helped with your own mental health and wellness.

Probe: How has this experience also influenced your own self-care routine as a therapist?

- 9) Why did you specifically choose to obtain your certification through The Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH Intl) in comparison to other groups offering certifications for equine-related interventions?

Probe: What are the aspects of the PATH mission statement that are especially important to you?

- 10) I appreciate the time you took for this interview. Is there anything else you would like to share with me that you believe would be valuable for me to know?

Closing: Thank you very much for participating in the interview. Do you have any questions before we bring the interview to a close?

Appendix B: Social Media Invitation to Participate

Hello,

My name is Jaime Williams. I am currently a student in the General Psychology Research Doctoral Program at Walden University. I am conducting a study on equine-assisted activities and therapy in order to gain a better understanding of how horses are helpful for mental health and wellness in connection with the mission statement and goals of The Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH Intl). I am seeking equine specialists and therapists certified through PATH Intl to participate in interviews for my research related to equine-assisted activities and therapy. Equine specialists and therapists certified through organizations other than PATH Intl will not be included in this research study. The interview questions will be focused on how the horse is central to the goals, activities, and outcomes of equine-related interventions for mental health and wellness, as well as why PATH Intl was chosen for certification. The interviews will last about one hour. Participation is voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time. Interested candidates can contact me to obtain the informed consent form, which provides more details about the research study.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Jaime L. Williams

Appendix C: Participant Thank You Letter

Dear _____,

Thank you for your interest in my research study! I am excited to learn more about incorporating horses in psychology and counseling. Equine-related activities and therapies is a growing treatment method for mental health and wellness. I appreciate you taking the time to talk to me about your experiences using horses in therapy and counseling as an instructor/equine mental health specialist certified through the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH Intl).

The information you provide will be a valuable contribution to the understanding of the use of horses in counseling for mental health and wellness, as well as the mission and goals of PATH Intl.

Please review the attached consent form, which is required to participate in the research study. If you would like to continue with participation in the research study, please reply to this email stating that you consent to participate in the research study. Upon receiving your email agreeing to participate in the research study, I will send you a brief information sheet, which will include questions about your certifications and the best days and times to set up our interview.

If you have any questions about the research study, please contact me.

Thank you again for generously sharing your experiences as a PATH-certified therapist/equine specialist.

Sincerely,

Jaime L. Williams

Appendix D: Themes and Subthemes

| <u>Research Questions</u> | <u>Themes</u> | <u>Subthemes</u> |
|---------------------------|---------------|------------------------|
| Experiences of PATH | Why Horses | Nature |
| Certified Equine | | Power of the Herd |
| Specialists | | Non-judgmental |
| | Communication | Non-verbal |
| | | Relationships |
| | | Emotional Expression |
| Credentialing Factors | Credibility | History |
| In Choosing Path Intl | | Safety |
| | | Mental Health of Horse |
| | Opportunities | Certifications |
| | | Accreditation |
| | | Education |